Slayers Volume 09

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Color illustrations for the 9th Slayers novel, *The Cursed Sword of Bezeld*.

We hurried toward Bezeld,
hot on their trail!

"Who the hell are you people!?"
"Only an idiot would tell that
to someone as suspicious looking as you!"

Chapter 1 - Where Are You, Magic Sword?

A clear, almost mocking sound rang in the air as the sword shattered with ease.

"...Huh?"

"*Aaaargh!!*"

Gourry's confused exclamation was buried under the tourism official's earsplitting wail.

"Hey you! What do you think you're doing!? You just broke the village's legendary sword!" He advanced on us, his face a mixture of rage and anxiety.

"What are you talking about?" I snapped back. "What kind of sword snaps when you just *lean on it*? Legendary, my ass!" The official's face paled abruptly at my retort.

"Urk! Well... that... that's... well... that's just one of its legendary properties!"

"Like hell it is!"

Full of righteous indignation, my fist slammed straight into his face with a meaty thud.

Weapons of Legend.

There are some weapons so famous that their names become instantly recognizable. The Demon King's Stave of Bones, Ceifeed's Flare Dragon Sword and the Elmekia Blade, which only cuts on the astral plane. The legendary Blast Sword, so sharp it can even slice through the scales of a Deimos Dragon. The list goes on.

But the thing is, cheap swords temporarily enhanced with enchantments or gems aside, it's not every day you find a legendary magical weapon just lying around waiting for someone to take it.

That is, unless you believe in the rumors.

There's a cave somewhere where an enchanted weapon slumbers, waiting for its destined owner to appear. A strange cult based in somewhere or other is secretly concealing a marvelous sword. There's a lake in who knows what country where you can throw in a plain sword and a beautiful lady will appear to hand you a

legendary blade. And the most common one, of some sword stuck in some stone somewhere, that becomes yours if only you can draw it forth. The most frustrating cases are when there are real swords stuck in boulders, just outside of villages and towns.

All fake, of course. Nearly all of them are placed there by the villagers themselves. If you ask them why, they'll reply that they did it to try and attract visitors to the village. In other words, they create cheap tourist attractions with fancy-looking swords cut to look like they're stuck in boulders. Some places even collect fees just for the privilege of looking, or charge per try to any people who might want to try their luck at drawing the sword out.

That's right. Just like the village Gourry and I were visiting.

"Ooh, I'm so mad! I didn't even expect it to be a real legendary sword, but honestly! *All* the villagers were in cahoots to swindle us out of our money. I mean, it wasn't even that much, but still! It pisses me off."

After knocking out the tourism official, Gourry and I returned to a restaurant in town to grab some lunch and talk things over a little.

"Calm down. Getting angry will do nothing," Gourry said with a mouthful of fried salmon. He sat across from me, munching away without a care in the world.

"Stop talking like it's none of your business!" I snapped , reaching for a piece of steamed chicken. "This is all for *you*, you know! We're looking for a new sword!"

Right, Gourry and I were journeying across the world in search for a new magic sword. He might quite possibly be the dumbest person in the world, but Gourry Gabriev's skills with a sword were top class. He used to have a powerful weapon called the Sword of Light that could even hurt mazoku, but he lost it a while ago in the middle of a conflict that I caused. That was why we were following rumors all over the countryside in search of a replacement.

"But you can't expect to find a legendary sword so easily, right?"

"Of course. If anyone could find it, then it wouldn't have stayed lost long enough to become legend."

"Well, personally, I'm just fine with a normal sword..."

"*What're you talking about?!*" I gripped Gourry's fork hand tightly, looking up at him with glistening eyes. "I know you're a great swordsman, but even you're not invincible."

Slowly, surreptitiously, my left hand began moving pieces of fried salmon over to my plate, piece by piece.

"And if all you have is a regular sword," I continued, making sure he focused on me, "you won't be of any use against mazoku or wraiths. You haven't managed to get over your reflexes from when you had the Sword of Light, either. I can't even look, it makes me so nervous. You haven't forgot that time you were fighting a sorcerer and tried to slice his Flare Arrow in half, have you? You were almost burnt to a crisp!"

"...I was?"

Apparently, he *had* forgotten. I let out a long sigh. " Whatever. Anyway, *I* won't be able to rest easy until you have a magic sword."

"But... can't we just buy one, instead of going around looking for one? That mage's store we dropped by a while ago had a lot of swords."

"Look. Those swords have only been enchanted to be just a little sharper or stronger. I'd be impressed if you could even touch a ghost with one, much less cut an incoming spell. And against a true mazoku? It'd be worse than useless. In other words, if you want a decent enchanted sword, you have go and look for it, yourself."

"They don't sell decent enchanted swords at stores?"

"Of course not. Even if some store did manage to get a hold of a legendary weapon, some royalty or noble would pull strings to get their grubby hands on it. So if we want to find a sword like that, we have to look for it ourselves."

"I see. So it's no easy matter."

"That's why I told you not to be so easygoing."

"Oh! There they are!" A voice interrupted our conversation, and I turned to see an old man standing with the same official I'd beaten up just a few hours ago. Were they here to complain about the broken sword?

The pair slowly advanced towards us, the old man sidling up to talk in a lowered voice. "Excuse me, but aren't you the adventurers who just tried their hands at drawing the sword?"

"And what if we are? Are you here to complain because we broke your *legendary* sword?" I replied, smiling. The old man just smiled right back.

"No, no, of course not," he replied, the grease practically dripping from his voice. "In fact, I merely wanted to talk things over a little with you..." He sat on a chair next to me and lowered his voice even more. "You see, I'm the mayor of this village... and as you can see, it's not the wealthiest of places. It's hard to get to, and there are no monuments or attractions nearby. That's why we had to do what we did, you understand."

I see. He didn't want me spreading the word that the legend was fake. I smirked evilly. A sympathetic person might be compelled to agree, but such bleeding heart pleas had no effect on the fighter and genius sorceress, Lina Inverse! Though, come to think of it, my being a fighter or genius sorceress didn't really have much to do with anything in this case...

"Not the wealthiest of places, you say? You certainly dress well for the mayor of a poor town, don't you think? "

He flinched.

"You know, you look very healthy and well-fed, especially considering your age. And your clothes are made of some really fine material. Same for your official over there, too."

Another flinch. The color drained quickly from both men's faces. I could see it plain as day - these weasels were keeping the money the sword brought in for themselves.

"We-well, in any case. I thought it would only be fair if I returned the money you paid to see the sword and attempt to draw it." So said, the mayor drew a sack of coins from within his tunic and placed it on the table. The pouch looked a bit too fat, considering it was only supposed to contain our entrance fees.

"You wouldn't be trying to bribe us to keep our mouths shut, by any chance?"

"No, no. I just think that it would be most unfortunate if strange rumors happened to besmirch the village's legend..."

"So you're going to shut us up, and keep on filling your purses with the money the sword brings you?"

The old man flinched yet again, hurriedly waving his hands. "No! Of course not! We won't be using the sword again, trust me!" His eyes, however, told me a different story. "I can't afford to pay you any more, but... oh, of course!" The mayor clapped once, as though he'd just remembered something. "You seem to be looking for a legendary sword, right? Well, it just so happens that I know of a story involving one such sword. If you would look the other way just once..."

I narrowed my eyes. Only a fool would believe a story about a legendary sword, from a man who'd already been caught scamming people with a fake one.

"Hmm... Well, I guess it couldn't hurt to hear you out."

"Oh!" The mayor was overjoyed. "Right!"

"*But*," I added forcefully, shooting him a glare, "if you're lying..." I let my words trail off menacingly.

"Y-yes, of course!"

"Okay. Let's hear it."

"Mmm... yes, well. If you follow the big road east of here to the north for four or five days, you'll reach a village called Bezeld."

"Mhmm."

"There's a mountain there, and in that mountain is a cave..."

Wait. A cave? In a mountain? This seemed familiar...

"And inside the cave is a stone with a sword stuck-"

"*Give it a rest!*"

Once again, my fist found a nice home, buried in a man's face.

"Bah. If you're going to lie, at least put a little effort into it..."

After knocking out the mayor and taking more bribes to ensure our secrecy, Gourry and I left the village. The sky was clear, and the sun shined merrily down on us. A wagon pulled by a donkey passed us, clattering by on rickety wheels. Though we hadn't manage to get any clues about magic swords, I supposed it was all right to travel aimlessly like this from time to time. Though I wouldn't have shed any regretful tears if a roving band of marauders happened to pop up so I could kick their asses and rob them blind...

"So, Lina. What are you thinking of doing now?" Gourry asked, once we came in view of a little town. Coal was heaped in piles around it.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I was thinking of maybe visiting Bezeld."

"Bezeld?" Gourry's brow furrowed - it was what passed for deep thought with him. "I've heard that name somewhere..."

"The name of the town the lying mayor just told us."

"Oh, right." Gourry nodded, smiled, frowned. "But didn't you say he was a liar?"

"I did. He's a liar for sure."

Gourry fell silent, and for a time all I could hear was the chirping of birds.

"I don't understand. Then why are we going to Bezeld?"

"Because we don't have anywhere else to go."

"Oh."

"It's not like there are many rumors about legendary swords that're worth trusting, you know. And even if a rumor turns out to be true, chances are that someone else has already gone and taken it. So, I figured there's nothing to lose from going to Bezeld since we don't have anywhere better to go."

"I see. A laid-back, wandering trip, then?"

"Right," I said, smiling. The smile vanished when a loud crashing sound rent the air, banishing the lazy silence. Nothing in the immediate vicinity was amiss, but a huge plume of black smoke was rising from the town we'd been headed toward.

"What the..."

"It looks like we can't relax just yet. Let's go, Lina!"

"Okay!" After all, where there are problems, there's danger... and money!

With that thought fixed firmly in mind, Gourry and I sprinted toward the town.

The townspeople were already gathered in a large crowd by the time we got there. A house had been nearly demolished - hit by something like a Fireball, from the looks of it. Portions of the building had been completely destroyed, and smoke rose thickly from inside.

"What happened?" I asked, but the villagers only turned wide eyes to me and shrugged, as bewildered as I was.

"That's what I want to know," one said. "We don't have an inkling of what happened here, either."

"By the time we heard the sound and got here, it was already like this..."

"A girl was living here alone! Hey, you! Can you help us out here a little?"

"Okay! Leave it to me! It'll be over in a flash!" I shouted , thrusting out a hand. "*Vu Vraimer!*"

The ground around the house obeyed my words of power, rising up to become a golem. The crowd voiced their surprise with appreciative murmurs.

"Golem! Clear these stones!"

"*Ooooh!*"

Following my commands, the golem began to clear away the smoking rocks. But it wasn't long since he'd started before a second explosion rang out from the forests behind us.

"Golem! If there's anybody inside, move the stones trapping them and wait! If not, keep working until you've moved all the debris!"

Leaving the house in the golem's hands, I took off with Gourry, running into the forest. It wasn't long before a third explosion came, closer than I'd expected. I shared a glance with Gourry, nodded, and together we turned and dashed toward the sound's origin.

The girl landed softly on the forest floor, her languid movements reminiscent of a cat's. She looked to be about fourteen, maybe fifteen years old, a little on the small side, with large eyes. In other words, just a normal, average village girl, her long black hair twisted into a single triple-braided pigtail that passed over her shoulder.

"You didn't think you'd be able to get away, did you?"

And in front of her stood a man like a shadow, his entire body shrouded in black clothes. Only his eyes were left uncovered. I would have called him an assassin, but there was something about him that wasn't quite like an assassin at all.

"Say you did manage to escape from me!" the man continued. "Then where would you go? You have no family, and your home is already in shambles thanks to my Fireball. What, are you going to wallow in your own loneliness under the night sky? It'll be better for you if you stop this useless struggling and come quietly with me."

"You're pretty eloquent considering what you look like , you know!"

It wasn't the girl who said that, oh no.

"What? Who said that!?"

It was none other than me, accompanied by my trusty partner Gourry. We'd finally found our way, following the sounds and traces of fighting these two had left behind.

"Who the hell are you people!?"

"Only an idiot would tell that to someone as suspicious looking as you!"

"What? Suspicious looking? Don't stereotype people like that!" the man said, his voice rough and low.

Oh, come on. Surely he wasn't expecting me to think he *didn't* look suspicious in a getup like that.

"I don't know who you are, but why are you here?" he demanded.

"We were just passing by through the village when a house suddenly blew up, and then we heard another explosion in the woods. Anyone would be curious and come to take a look," I said. "Now, it's my turn to ask a question. If someone came to the place you lived, blew a house sky high with a spell, and then you found him trying to kidnap a girl, wouldn't you think that someone was pretty suspicious?"

"Tha... that's different! I-it's all right because I'm on a mission!"

"A mission?" My eyebrows rose despite myself.

"It's none of your business!"

"Well, whatever," Gourry said, taking a step forward. " But we can't really look the other way now, you know? I don't suppose you want to compromise?"

"Of course not. It's your choice to butt in in the name of some kind of deluded sense of justice, but let me warn you: if you're not going to leave now, then I'll have to respond accordingly. I'm sure you know what that means."

"You're going to shut our mouths by force, then?" I snorted. The man in black's threats were so run-of-the-mill. "Look. If we were the type to give up and run because of some wimpy threats, we wouldn't even have gotten involved with suspicious creeps like you in the first place."

The man didn't reply, instead drawing a dagger from the sheath at his hip. I couldn't make out any openings in his stance. He was a bit mouthy, especially considering his outfit, but from what I could tell he was no slouch in the fighting department.

The girl who'd been watching us hadn't even made a move while we were talking, for some reason. She hadn't even tried. I'd been hoping she'd take the hint and run away while I kept the man busy talking, but it looked like she wasn't going to move any time soon.

Gourry squared his stance and drew his longsword.

"My name is Gourry Gabriev."

"Just call me Zain."

The instant Zain finished speaking, a scornful voice came from behind him.

"You fool!"

A man, swathed in black clothes just like Zain, stepped out of the woods. He'd been hiding his presence? Then that meant... the girl hadn't been moving because she'd sensed him there? When even I couldn't sense a thing?

Zain seemed flustered at the other man's scorn, sputtering, "Ga...Gal-"

"*Don't say my name!*"

"But-"

"I can't believe you not only revealed your name, but almost called out mine as well! How careless can you get ?"

"Bu...but they're just code names, sir."

"You..." The second man in black looked incredibly angry at Zain's thoughtless words. I guess I would be too , with a dunce like that for a minion. I sighed.

"So, code names. That means you two probably belong to some kind of organization, most likely employed by royalty or nobility."

"Huh? How'd you know?"

Heh. I knew he'd take the bait.

Gal-whatever just sighed. "Somehow we've ended up revealing too much," he said, his cold, calm voice a stark contrast to the flustered Zain. "I'm sorry, but we're going to have to shut you up, permanently. If you must, hate yourselves for purposely getting involved in things that are none of your business, and Zain for having a loose tongue."

"You talk big, don't you? Fine! Shut us up, if you can!" The tension in the air was almost palpable.

What bothered me was that the girl still hadn't moved a single step from where she stood. I wondered if she was simply too scared to move... or if there were more allies of these men in black, hiding close by.

"Hah!" Zain rushed forward and took the initiative, as if to cut off my pensive thoughts. Weaving his way through the trees with surprising speed, Zain closed the distance to Gourry in an instant. Two lines of silver flashed in the sunlight streaming down through the trees , followed by the sharp sound of clashing steel.

"Bah!"

Zain let out a muttered curse as Gourry parried his first attack, instantly segueing into a second slash. He was pretty good, but nothing compared to Gourry, in my opinion. But this was no time for thinking about him - the moment Zain attacked, the other man in black drew his sword and sprang toward me!

No time to cast a spell! I drew my dagger from my waist and blocked, preparing a spell with my other hand. The shock ran through my arm, making me wince. This guy was no slouch, either. If I hadn't been learning basic sword techniques from Gourry, I might've croaked right then and there.

Just like Zain, the other man in black drew back as soon as he saw his strike parried, shifting to the side and attacking again - not me, but Gourry! It looked like they were trying to team up on him and finish him off.

Gourry parried the second man in black's slash with his sword and bent his body to the side, just barely avoiding Zain's attack. The tortured screech of Zain's sword grating on Gourry's breastplate filled the air. Instantly Zain drew back, intent on attacking again while Gourry was busy with the second man.

Not if I had anything to say about it. "*Diem Wind!*"

There was a rush of displaced air as my spell sent all three of them flying. Whoops. I hadn't been able to avoid hitting Gourry as well, but at least I'd stopped them from attacking him.

"Damn! You'd hit your companion just to get to us?" Zain snarled, getting to his feet.

"Hah! Haven't you ever heard of sacrificing the few for the needs of the many?"

Zain stared at me. "What kind of person *are* you?"

I just replied with a faint smile.

While I was buying time verbally sparring with Zain, Gourry managed to stand up and get a hold of his sword again. I'd only said those things to buy time for him to get to his feet. I'm not really that cold-blooded a person. Really. Believe me. Please.

Anyway, these guys meant business - even Zain, talkative and easily flustered as he was, was a good fighter, and ruthless. We had to end this quickly.

"Gourry! I'm gonna go for a big blast! Don't feel bad if you get caught in it, okay?" I called. Unfortunately, Gourry was more worried by my bluff than either of the two men.

"Wa... wait, Lina! Can't you think things over a little?"

"Lina? Are you by chance Lina Inverse?"

That voice hadn't belonged to either of the men in black. It had been the girl who'd been watching us.

"Li... Lina Inverse?"

Zain looked askance at Gal-whatever. "Do you know her?"

"Don't you know? She's one of the people nobody wants to even mention by name! She's a sorceress in the *Top Ten People You Don't Want to be Friends With List!*"

"What?!" I cried, shocked. "Hey! What kind of Top Ten is *that?* Who made it, anyway?" I knew infamy and unsavory rumors were the price of fame, but...

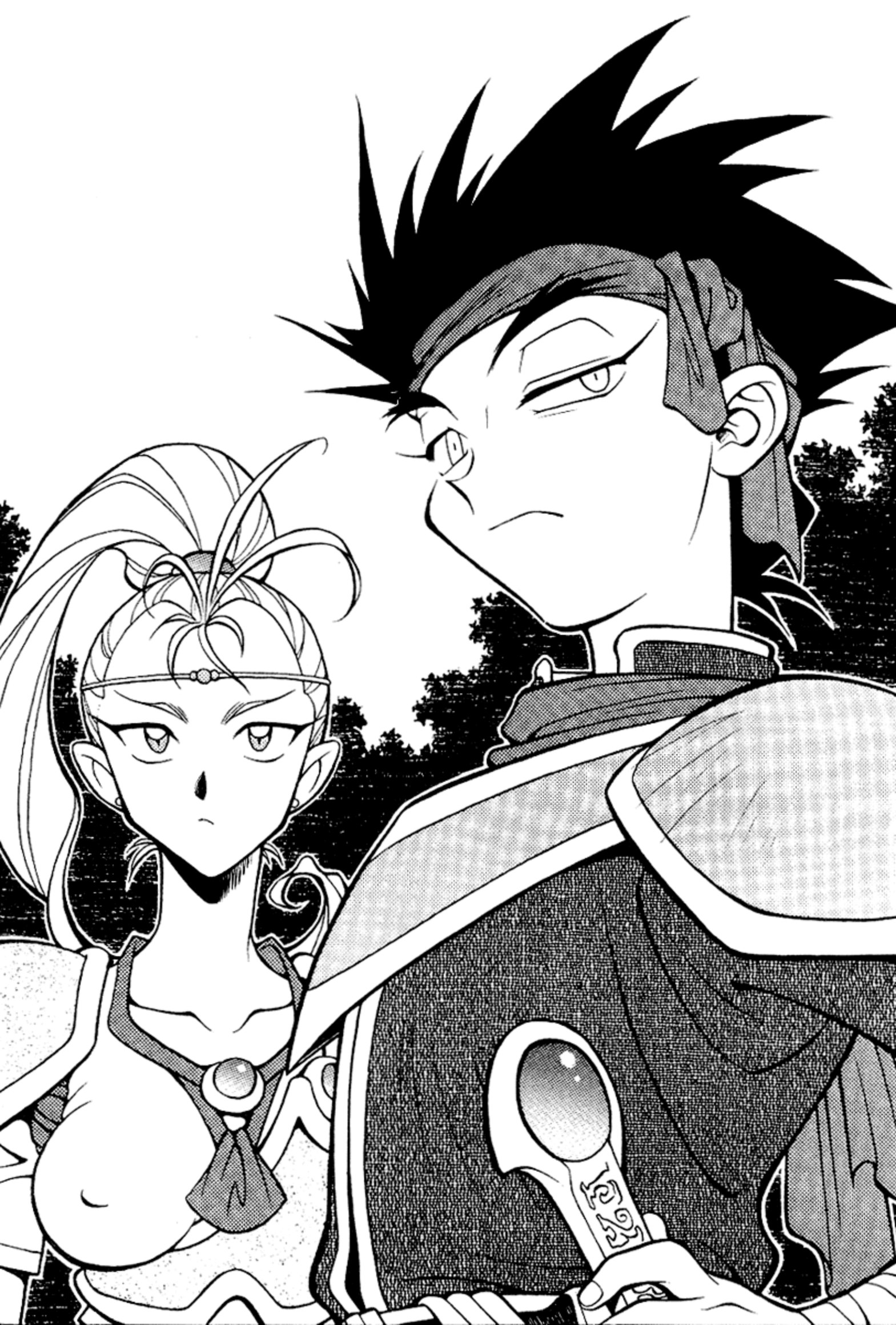
The man in black clicked his tongue and said, "Looks like we picked the wrong fight. Still, as long as it's two on two, we still have a chance..."

"Then how about four on two?" a voice said, from behind them - from the direction of the village. The men in black warily glanced over their shoulders, remaining alert in case we decided to attack. Everyone focused on the two newcomers.

Both of them looked to be in their early twenties. The man was tall, with short black hair - I'd have called him handsome if his eyes hadn't seemed just a little too sharp and cruel. The woman was tall as well, and beautiful, with long silver hair tied into a ponytail. They both held swords at the ready. The man wore proper armor while

the woman sufficed with a hardened leather shoulderpad .

In other words, a generic pair of mercenaries. At least it looked like they weren't working with the men in black ...



"So, what'll it be? If you stand and fight any more, the villagers might come to watch, you know."

"Blast! Retreat!" the second man in black said, clicking his tongue in disappointment once more before vanishing cleanly into the forest. Not a bad exit, if I say so myself.

"Don't think you've seen the last of us! We'll be back! Just you wait!"

Zain, on the other hand... Right. Yeah.

Gourry and I only relaxed once we were sure the two were gone completely. "Thanks for saving us," I said, turning to the mysterious duo.

"Don't mention it," the man said, waving his hand nonchalantly. "It's not like we were doing this for you. We just happen to know the girl over there, actually." He gave a flick of his head towards the pigtailed girl.

"Long time no see, Sherra. Were those men after you because of that?" His voice was a fair bit warmer than it had been when talking to us.

"I don't know!" the girl replied obtusely, giving her pigtail a light flick with her hand.

That?

"Hey... you know, it'd be nice if we got some kind of explanation for what's going on..." I started, but the man didn't even give me a glance as he turned away, again waving his hand dismissively.

"Oh, you two're still here? You can go back now."

Grrr...

"Wait-"

"I know how you feel, Sherra. But you know, the world doesn't do what you want it to do just because you're stubborn about it."

"Look here, old man!"

Well. That certainly got his attention, judging from the way he suddenly froze, his shoulders trembling slightly. Great! Now that I'd hit a nerve, I had the upper hand!

A vein popped out on his forehead as he slowly turned around. "Old... *old man?*"

I cut him off before he could get any further. "Look, we were the ones who got here first. Just who do you think you are, telling us we can 'go back now' when you didn't even lift a finger, huh? An old man, that's who! I don't know how old you really are, but inside you're really just a *grouchy, old man!*"

Wilting in the face of my verbal barrage, the man sent a pleading glance to the woman who'd come with him. For her part, she completely ignored his pitiful gaze, simply staring back at us with marked curiosity. All right , now to turn up the heat!

...

Wait. That's not it.

That's right. I wasn't supposed to make him mad - I was supposed to wheedle information out of him. Heheh . I almost forgot.

But... talking with the man would only lead to an insult slinging contest at best, and it looked like the

woman was a sight more taciturn than her partner, and therefore less inclined to talk. That left only one person!

I smiled sweetly at the little girl, Sherra, and said, "Hey , you! Do you know who I am?"

"Ah... Yes, since you *are* a very famous person, in many ways."

In many ways? The phrase and the way she said it irked me, but I let it go with a great, nearly superhuman exertion of will.

"I see. Then, how's this? You tell me what's going on, and I'll give you an autograph!"

"Huh?" Sherra's face showed open confusion. "Uh... I mean... I... umm..."

"Hey, little girl." Gourry's voice was filled with honest concern at Sherra's bewilderment. "If I were you, I'd just cut my losses and take the autograph. Though I do suppose an autograph from someone like Lina would probably only leave a bad taste in your mouth..."

Why, you...

"But just imagine what'd happen if you refused. Lina wouldn't take that sitting down, no way. She'd probably go on a rampage! Just take it and maybe you'll find a use for it when you go to the bathroom or somethi-"

A rock the size of a human head, applied with judicious force to his skull, shut Gourry's mouth.

"You probably know there are lots of unpleasant rumors about me making the rounds," I said, smiling sweetly. "But don't you think it'd be unfair to judge a person by such rumors without even getting to know her ?"

Sherra thought it over for a moment and nodded cautiously.

"I mean, everyone has one or two things they don't want to talk about. But you were being chased by those two men for some reason, and they were even willing to kill us to make sure we didn't talk about whatever it was. Don't you think it'd be wrong to keep your mouth shut over such an important matter?"

The girl kept her silence, obviously thinking things over. Good, this was my cue to push forward!

"I won't ask you to tell us everything. After all, we're the ones who butted in on you, right? But I'd appreciate it a lot if you just told me what you can. Who knows? Maybe telling us about it will make you feel better, or we might be able to help you somehow."

"Oh, no, that won't be necessary. You don't have to tell 'em a thing," the man said, taking a step toward Sherra. " After all, we're all the help you need. Ain't that right, Milina?"

"Whatever, Luke. Your selfish intentions are showing through, you know," the silver-haired woman said, smirking.

"Hey! What do you mean by that? People'll get the wrong image! I just couldn't leave a cute little girl in danger like this. Oh! But wait! Don't get me wrong, Milina. You're the only one for me!"

"Idiot," the woman muttered.

Now, if she'd said it with a blush, maybe averting her eyes to one side, then I would've thought that they loved each other... But no, judging from the way she just snorted and spat the word out, it looked like Luke was the one who'd fallen head over heels for Milina, and the

feeling wasn't mutual. But anyway, that wasn't important.

"You know, if you're the type who can't bear to see a cute girl in trouble, then doesn't it bother you that I'm completely in the dark about what's going on?"

Luke just stared at me for a long moment before saying, "I really like seeing annoying girls get what they deserve."

That was the last straw. I took a running start and leaped, my boot striking a resounding blow to the side of Luke's face. "*What did you say?!*"

"What the- what the hell is wrong with you?!"

"Shut up. You're the one who pissed me off!"

"What, was I wrong?"

"Of course you were! It's because you're so thick that Milina over there won't even give you the time of day!"

"*What?!* Of course she will! We're a perfectly happy, loving couple! Right, Milina?"

"I wouldn't say that," Milina shot back, looking a bit miffed at Luke's words.

"I don't believe it! My love still hasn't reached you?"

"Hahaha! See? *You're* the one with a crush on *her!*"

"Didn't I tell you to shut up! What would a flat-chested , wishy-washy waif like you know of romance, anyway?"

Erk!

"who're you calling wishy-washy, huh?!"

"Uh... You know, the girl's leaving."

"Shut up, Gourry, can't you see I'm- eh?"

Gourry had apparently regained consciousness some time ago, and when I turned to look the way he was pointing I saw Sherra walking back towards town by herself.

"Hey! Wa, wait!"

"Wait for us, Sherra!"

We all started running after her.

"Why're you two tagging along?" Luke asked, shooting us a glare that I matched with equal malice.

"Because the town is this way, dummy. Why're *you* two following that girl, anyway? She didn't look like she liked you all that much."

"What? Then d'you think she liked *you?*"

"At least she liked me more than she did *you!*"

"You've got a big mouth, you know that?"

"Yeah, and what of it, huh?"

If looks could kill, both of us would have been dead as door nails by the time we reached town. A little behind us, Gourry and Milina followed, doing their best to look as if they didn't know us.

Judging from the way Sherra had talked to them, it looked as though they were following her even though she didn't want them to... maybe they were after the same thing the men in black had been? And just what had they been after, anyway?

The most likely answer to that question was, of course, treasure. Sherra might be the keeper to the key of some treasure, and both the men in black and these two were after it. That made perfect sense.

Furthermore, if, like I thought, the men in black had been special forces in the employ of some kingdom or lordship, then chances were high that the treasure was pretty valuable!

"Eeeek!"

Sherra's sudden, piercing shriek cut through the air, abruptly ending my line of thought.

"What's wrong?" I called, hurrying to the girl.

While I was arguing with Luke, we'd reached the town borders. Sherra stood there, looking at the crowd of gathered people, and the golem I'd made. Oh, and the shapeless mound of rocks and rubble that had once been her house.

"Are you all right?"

"What happened?"

Sherra ignored the villagers' concerned inquiries, whispering, "My... house..."

"Oh, that," one said, pointing at me. "That nice lady there thought you might be buried underneath the rubble, so she made a golem to clear the stones away."

"Ahahahaha..." Sherra slowly turned to face me, giggling eerily. "I know a Fireball hit it, but at least part of it was fine... It looks like your golem just finished the job. How considerate."

Oh no! Sherra's eyes were flashing with anger. I had to make an excuse!

"N, no, I didn't mean to demolish your house. I told the golem to clear the stones and ran into the woods... I guess the golem couldn't tell where the rubble ended and the house began. Heheheh... heh. Umm... I'm sorry?"

"You're *sorry?*" Sherra shouted. "What are you going to do about this? I don't even have anywhere to sleep tonight!"

"Umm... well... I guess that's a problem that needs to be solved?"

"It's *your* problem! What are you going to do about my house?"

"Uh... umm... right! If I make a dozen golems and tell them to build a house..."

"I don't want to live in a creepy house like that!"

Bah. Picky little squirt, wasn't she? I tried to think of a way to make her feel better.

At length, we settled on getting her a room at the inn for the night, the fee coming out of my own purse.

"But you know... the thing I'm curious about is, why are you two still here?" Night had fallen, and Gourry and I were seated at a table on the inn's first floor, having some dinner. The "you two" referred, of course, to Luke and Milina, who were sitting across from us.

"Well, this *is* the only inn in town, y'know," Luke replied lightly, shrugging. "We ain't sitting here because we wanted to see *you.* We're just sharing a table with with Sherra here."

Seated between the four of us, Sherra pointedly ignored everyone and merely continued to eat, a markedly surly expression clouding her face. Hmm... looked like she was still in a foul mood.

I thought it would be best to just leave her be until she cooled down a little. The problem was, between the sulking Sherra and the naturally taciturn Milina, the conversation naturally moved into a heated argument between Luke and I.

Gourry, of course, was a non-factor. Trying to get intelligent conversation - or even a rational opinion, for that matter - from him was as futile as tying a rope to a tree branch and trying to bungee jump off of it. But at the same time, it was clear that just arguing the night away with Luke would do nothing to make Sherra feel better. Maybe it was time for a switch of tactics. I cleared my throat and turned in my seat to face Sherra.

"Are you... still angry, Sherra?" I asked timidly, shoveling a heaping forkful of buttery fried salmon into my mouth.

I chewed once, then wrapped a whole beef roast in a few leaves of lettuce and shoved that in as well, attempting to take a reasonable tone. "I'm really sorry about what happened earlier today, and I want to apologize..."

A few handfuls of steamed shrimp disappeared into my mouth. "But I know you probably won't be satisfied with just an apology..." I made a makeshift sandwich out of lettuce, pork sausages and a wedge of lemon shoved between two loaves of bread, and took a big bite.

"...So I want to know if there's any way I can help you."

"You're not being very convincing at *all!*"

Huh. What was her problem? Seemingly miffed for some reason, Sherra dropped her fork and knife to the table with a loud clatter and sprang to her feet.

"I don't care about my house anymore! Just stop following me around! That means you, and you!" she

shouted, pointing at both me and Luke. Huffing indignantly, Sherra turned and stomped off in the direction of the bedrooms.

Luke watched her go and turned to glare at me. " What're you gonna do? You just made her angrier," he said testily.

"Don't act like it's all my fault!"

"What're you talking about? It *is* all your fault!"

"What?! Just how is this *my* fault?"

"Anybody'd get mad if you said things like that while stuffing your fat face!"

"They would not!" You know what I said, if looks could kill? Right, this was another one of those times.

"How about the both of you put things off until next morning?" Milina said, her quiet voice effortlessly defusing the bomb that had been about to blow. "I'm sure she'll have calmed down by tomorrow."

"Hmm... Well... I guess you're right."

"If Milina says so, I ain't objecting."

"Good," Milina said, flashing a sudden smile. "Let's try to at least have a quiet dinner."

"Oh, were you looking for Sherra? She left early in the morning."

"...*What?*"

All four of us could only gape, dumbstruck, at the innkeeper. We'd started eating breakfast in awkward silence, then noticed that Sherra wasn't coming down and went up to look. The room had been empty! Worried that the sinister men in black had gotten their hands on her, we went to check with the innkeeper, and...

...So we came to where we were now.

She'd been away too long for it to be a brisk morning stroll.

"So, umm... do you happen to know where she went?" I asked.

The innkeeper thought it over for a minute. "Well, she didn't tell me where she was headed, but she *did* tell me something else..."

"Oh?"

"Right. She said that the russet haired sorceress would pay for her room and board. I'm guessing that means you ."

...I didn't need to hear that.

Luke glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "Poor Sherra. I guess that means she ain't coming back. Though , to be honest, I can't blame her. You know, since *somebody* completely demolished her house..."

"Erk! What?! And who was it who said she'd calm down after a good night's sleep?"

"Don't go and pin this on Milina!"

"So you're saying it's my fault? Gah, never mind. For now, finding Sherra comes first. She might still close by, and I'm going to look for her. Come on, Gourry!"

"Right!"

...Well, we left confidently enough, but come lunchtime we returned to the inn, empty handed.

"Hmm... She wasn't at what was left of her home, and none of the villagers seem to have seen her, either. Maybe she's already gone," I said dejectedly, quenching my thirst with a pitcher of fruit juice. I could practically see the riches slipping away through my fingers.

"Then what are we going to do?"

I heaved a short sigh at Gourry's words and replied, " What do you mean by that? There's nothing we *can* do, now that she's gone. If she's not in the village, we don't have any way of knowing where she might have taken off to."

"Come to think of it, I don't see those other two around ."

"Maybe they've gone on a hike or something? Even if they have disappeared, it's not like..."

It'd change anything, I'd meant to say, but my words trailed off as something suddenly occurred to me. The pair hadn't said anything as we left to find Sherra. Maybe they'd already known where she would be? And then they'd waited for us to leave before heading off to find her?

I threw back the last of my juice and stood up, walking over to the kitchen where the innkeeper was doing the dishes.

"Excuse me! Do you happen to know where the couple we were with earlier today might have gone?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you. They paid and left immediately after you headed off."

"Didn't they tell you where they might be going?"

"No, I don't... wait, yes. The man said to pass this message on to you: 'Without Sherra, it's no use for you to keep trying, so give up and go home.'"

"What?" My brow furrowed in thought. Something was suspicious. *Very* suspicious. Why would a guy who'd argued with me so much suddenly just tell me to give up? There was only one possibility: *they* hadn't given up. Also, they probably knew where Sherra was headed. So they'd waited until we were gone, left a message telling us to give up, and ran off after Sherra?

Then there was only one thing to do! Chase after Luke and Milina! And in order to do that, we had to find clues.

"We didn't really get to know them well, actually. Is there anything you might have to tell us about them? It might help us find out where Sherra's gone."

The innkeeper scratched his head with one soapy hand and replied, "I just thought they were wandering mercenaries, so I didn't really ask them that much... They came here around three or four days ago and visited Sherra occasionally."

"They already knew each other?"

"I don't know. You see, Sherra hasn't been living here all that long, either."

"You mean she moved here from somewhere else?"

"Moved...? I guess you could call it that. We just noticed one day that she was living here."

"Why, you irresponsible..."

"No, no. You see, there used to be a man called Glenn who lived there. He was born here, lived together with his mother in that house, but he was a bad sort and broke his poor mother's heart."

The innkeeper suddenly started rambling on about things I didn't even want to know. Was this the fabled Gossip Disease?

The Gossip Disease often befell men and women who lived in the countryside, causing them to talk endlessly to any visitors who had the bad luck to ask them a question. Those unlucky souls caught in their thrall were fated to listen to unbelievably boring anecdotes forever.

But there was a way to escape: you remembered an " urgent" meeting with someone that you had to go to right away, and made it clear that you had to leave.

Though there were some fearsome opponents immune to even this technique, I was sure it would work on this run-of-the-mill old man.

Still, sometimes you could glean valuable knowledge from such gossip. I resolved to listen a little first before utilizing my technique.

"...he was a man who dreamed of getting rich quick. Liked his liquor more than his food, he did; spent more time outside the house than he did inside. Wasn't even there when his poor mother passed away. The villagers didn't like him, of course. Anyway, was it two years ago? Three? Well, anyway, he snuck into town with a little girl , and though neither of them said a word, everyone thought that Sherra was probably his daughter. Some time later, Glenn got drunk, fell off a bridge into the river and died, and ever since then she's been living there alone. Oh, I'm boring you, aren't I?"

"No, I love listening to stories like this," I stammered, waving my hands.

"But that man who came along with you is already asleep."

"Huh?"

I looked to my side, and what do you know, there was Gourry, leaning against the wall and snoring away without a care in the world.

That idiot...

I was tempted to give him a good, stiff kick to wake him up, but I reigned that urge in. Wouldn't do to have the innkeeper distracted from his story.

"Let him sleep if he wants," I said. "So, anyway. Sherra's been living there since Glenn died, and...?" I squelched my need to hit Gourry and goaded the innkeeper into continuing.

"...Right. So that's how she came to live here in this town. She must have felt a lot of pressure, being from outside and all. She didn't make many friends, but the villagers liked her well enough. Most of it was pity, seeing as how she must have suffered so much with a father like that."

"Suffer? She had to work after her father died, then?"

"Hmm? Come to think of it, I don't know," the innkeeper said, unaware of my masterful manipulation of the conversation.

I see. Even after her good-for-nothing father died, how did Sherra manage to survive by herself without having to work at all? The likelihood that she had some kind of hidden treasure grew even greater.

"She didn't work? It doesn't sound like her father would have left her anything, based on what I've heard from you so far..."

The innkeeper waved his hand in reply. "Of course he didn't. He was the sort of man who'd drink tomorrow's money away today if he could. He sold everything he owned. Always said he'd hit the mother lode some day. The funny thing is, he went to Bezeld one day saying he'd mine orihalcon."

Hmm... that's not quite what I'd expected.

...Wait. "*Orihalcon?!*" I shouted in surprise.

Orihalcon was a metal that was probably unfamiliar to the average person, but due to its unique characteristics - namely, the ability to contain and block magic to a certain degree - it was always in high demand among researching sorcerers.

The only drawback was that orihalcon was far rarer than gold, to the point where orihalcon eventually came to be worth several times its weight in platinum. But on the other hand, that also meant there was nothing better than orihalcon if you wanted to turn from rags to riches.

"They found orihalcon ore? In Bezeld? Wait, Bezeld?" I frowned at my own words, the memory coming back suddenly. Bezeld had been the place where that cheating mayor had said a legendary sword was.

"Well, it was actually found there two decades ago, and only one nugget was ever found. But even then, Glenn moseyed down there in search of it. Of course, he didn't find what he was looking for. Do you know what he said in his defense when the townspeople made fun of him?

He was rambling again.

"It's the strangest story. Glenn said he couldn't find any orihalcon, but he dug his way into a strange cave instead. In that cave there was this sword stuck into a stone, but he said it gave him the shivers so he just came back."

"*Whaaaat!?*" The shout came from my mouth unconsciously.

"Di, did you just say *sword?*"

"Ah, uh, yes. Of course, it was probably all made up, you know. He was pretty deep in his cups when he told me that story."

"I see..." I gave a neutral reply, but my attention wasn't on the conversation at all.

If Glenn had been drunk when he told his tale, then the chances of it being true rose even more. You see, there weren't many people who would admit to being so scared they ran away, while drunk. A normal excuse for such an ignoble retreat would have been something far more impressive - for example, a horrible monster emerging from the cave, so scary that anyone would have fled.

I had to admit, though, that a drunk man's story probably wasn't enough to conclude for sure that there was any kind of special sword in Bezeld.

"So this is what I told my wife, see. In my opinion, Sherra is Glenn's daughter who he sired in Bezeld. She's just about as old as a person born when Glenn went to Bezeld would be. And he really liked the ladies, Glenn did..."

The innkeeper's tale started veering off into the rumors he'd heard and private theories he'd concocted, and I just nodded my head and made polite noises while my head whirled with thoughts. How much was true, and how much was false? The only thing I could be sure of was that the key to all these mysteries could be found in Bezeld.

Chapter 2 - The Shadow of Demons in Bezeld...

"So... there's a mysterious sword somewhere in Bezeld ?" Gourry said, as we walked along the path.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a chance that Sherra's father really did find orihalcon in Bezeld. Say he found an unexpected mother lode, but for some reason he couldn't bring it all back at once. So he made up a story to keep the villagers from getting too curious, and that story found its way to the ears of that swindling mayor. And his daughter, Sherra, not only knows where the orihalcon is, but also knows a way to discreetly convert it into money. That'd explain why she's been able to make a living even though nobody's ever seen her work."

"I see."

"The only obvious problem with this theory is, why would he make up a story about a sword? If he wanted to keep people from going to look, a story about some monster would have worked much better. Though I guess a sword would be a bit more believable...

"Hmm..."

"But on the other hand, if we assume that there really *is* a sword and not some great hoard of orihalcon, that in turn leaves us with no explanation for Sherra living alone without any visible income. There's the possibility that she did some kind of shady work, but judging from the innkeeper's opinion of her, that doesn't seem likely."

"Shady work?"

"Ah, don't worry about that. Or it could be that Glenn really did love his daughter, and he left her with some kind of inheritance. What I mean to say is, there are lots of possibilities. Got it?"

"Mmm..." Gourry pursed his lips, looking up at the sky . "I'm not sure, but I think you're trying to say... everything will be made clear once we get to Bezeld?"

"Well... yes." Grr... Don't summarize things like that! It makes me look long-winded for explaining everything!

"But we might be able to learn what's going on before that," Gourry said suddenly, stopping dead in his tracks. We were at a place where the path became thickly

surrounded with trees. It was easy to see what Gourry was expecting: an ambush.

Now, it wasn't exactly set in stone that you *had* to ambush people in forests where there wouldn't be many witnesses, but it was undeniably true that such places were great if you wanted to kill someone quietly. It was nearly impossible to see someone in drab clothes hiding in the flush undergrowth, after all. At times like these, you had to rely on being able to sense your would-be attackers' presence.

Even I could easily sense, say, a roving band of bandits lying in wait. But when the enemy was skilled enough to hide their presence, I couldn't be sure at all.

In such situations, Gourry's animal-like instincts were indispensable.

Maybe it was the men in black?

"Right," I said, moving my gaze to the forest and straining my eyes. "The ones waiting for us might be willing to explain everything."

"Don't concern yourself with the girl if you value your lives," a dark, husky man's voice said, sounding oddly

out of place in the bright and sunny light of day. Needless to say, it belonged to whoever was waiting in wait for us in the trees. I could hear his voice, but I still couldn't sense where he was. It seemed like he was willing to see how we reacted before making his move.

"What girl are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb," the unknown man said coldly.

"Heh. It looks like you've got a brain on your shoulders," I said. "Unlike Zain."

"The only words I'm interested in hearing are 'yes' or ' no'."

Hmm... He was ignoring all my attempts at getting him to reveal anything, only saying what he had to say. I guessed he was a fair bit better at negotiating than Zain had been. Well, then...

"Does your master really want that sword so badly?"

"Yes, or no."

Bah! Stubborn one, wasn't he? How about *this?!*

"You're telling us not to concern ourselves with Sherra. .. but you don't know where she is right now, either, do you? That means no matter how big you talk, we hold the advantage here - since we know that much, at least."

The voice fell silent for a moment. Heh! How would he deal with that?

A whisper on the wind was the only warning we got before something came flying out of the trees towards us!

Just as I expected! A brace of throwing knives embedded themselves in the dirt where we'd been only moments before-

Erk! I couldn't move! Shadow Snap?

Even though Shadow Snap was a minor spell that only kept the opponent from moving, it still took a fair amount of concentration to cast properly. Being able to pin both of us with separate casts meant that our enemy was considerably skilled.

But that didn't mean it couldn't be beat. "*Fireball!*"

My spell slammed into the dirt, causing a huge explosion and banishing our shadows in the sudden firelight. We could move again.

"What?" It seemed our attacker was more than a little surprised at my quick response.

"There you are!" Gourry cried, drawing his sword and rushing towards the place where the knives had come from. A flash of silver split the air as another blade flew towards him, but he quickly parried it. At that moment, an onyx shadow detached itself from the trees and flew out into the sunlight. From his black clothes, it was clear whose side the man was on.

"I knew you were in cahoots with Zain!"

The man in black didn't reply, instead darting towards us with amazing speed.

"You'll have to try harder than that," I called, bending my body to avoid another small knife the man threw, even as he avoided a wide slash from Gourry.

With a wordless shout, Gourry reversed directions in a blur of motion, gathering momentum into a powerful

thrust. I couldn't even tell when he'd drawn, but a dagger appeared as if by magic in the shadowy man's left hand, barely deflecting Gourry's attack. At the same time, a snap of his right wrist sent yet another knife flying at Gourry - too close to avoid!

His body flowing like quicksilver, Gourry somehow managed to avoid the impossibly quick attack and the man in black drew back, shifting to charge towards me. Another knife flew at me, but from this distance it was easy to avoid.

Something was wrong. For a man skilled enough to block Gourry's attacks, his attacks were way too simple and straightforward. Then could it be...?

I began muttering a spell beneath my breath, forcing myself to draw back from the heat of battle and widen my field of vision. The man in black continued to dart around, throwing easily avoidable knives at Gourry and I. Suddenly, he threw himself backwards, clapping his hands together. Like I'd thought, it was a set-up for something greater!

"*Gaia Graze!*"

The earth responded violently to the words of power, turning a dark shade of blackish purple and lurching like a living thing. The knives the man in black had thrown hadn't been aimed at us - they'd been forming a makeshift magic circle on the ground!

With a great explosion of dirt, a huge brass demon began rising out of the ground.

But I'd already known it was coming! The moment the brass demon's bulk hid the man in black from my sight, I thrust one hand outwards. "*Gaav Flare!*"

A gout of flame burst from my hand, reducing the brass demon to nothing but black dust and piercing through towards my enemy!

...Or at least, that was the plan.

"...Huh?" Not even a small sputter of sparks came from my outstretched palm, much less a mighty stream of fire. What-

Oh! That's right! It'd completely slipped my mind.. Gaav Flare was a spell that drew on the power of Chaos Dragon Gaav, one of the five Mazoku Lords under Ruby

Eye Shabranigdu... and as of a while ago, very, very dead . Of course a spell designed to call on his magic wouldn't work! How could I forget?

While I was busy drowning in my regrets, the brass demon announced its presence with a low roar. This was no time to be concerned about my mistakes!

The man in black pointed at us as I began casting another spell, yelling, "Kill them!"

The brass demon roared in response, a flurry of fireballs forming in front of it and jetting towards Gourry . Almost at the same time, Gourry made his move - not away from the demon, but towards it!

Thankfully, Gourry didn't start hacking away at the spells like I'd feared, instead weaving his way through them - but the man in black shrewdly hurled a salvo of deadly blades straight at him. If he blocked or avoided it, he'd be easy pickings for the demon.

Not on my watch! "*Dynast Breath!*" My spell rocketed forward, freezing and shattering the brass demon instantly. At the same time, Gourry's sword blurred and sent all the incoming knives flying in a series of metallic clangs.

"Impossible!" the man cried, suddenly frozen in shock. It was obvious he hadn't been expecting his hard-summoned brass demon to be defeated so easily. Taking the initiative, Gourry snagged one of the parried knives out of midair and sent it flying back. By the time the man in black noticed, it was already too late. The sharp blade embedded itself deep in his right calf.

"Argh!"

"It's over," Gourry said, slowly walking over to the man in black, who'd collapsed where he stood. "You can't fight with one leg lamed like that." Even as he talked, he didn't show a single opening to attack.

"Bah... so this is it..." In the sudden silence, I could hear the man in black gritting his teeth as he growled. As long as Gourry didn't lower his guard, there was no way the man in black could possibly win.

"So," I said. "Now that you've lost, maybe you'll be willing to tell us-"

Before I could even finish, the man's body exploded!

"What?!"

There was nobody else around. That meant...

"He killed himself to keep the secret... How could he do that?" I muttered.

"I guess we didn't learn anything useful, after all."

"What? We didn't learn everything, but we did manage to glean a lot of information."

"Huh? We did?" Gourry looked awed. I suppressed a sigh. Gourry would always be Gourry.

"Listen. The fact that the men in black were waiting for us along this path confirms that there's *something* in Bezeld."

"Why?"

"They want something that Sherra knows, too. Of course they'd try and stop anyone who was after the same thing. If we'd been going somewhere else, they'd see no need to warn us, or attack us."

"I see," Gourry said, nodding. "But wait. Does that mean the two who took off before us have already been taken out?"

"Maybe. Or they might have gone in the wrong direction, or avoided the road. And one other thing we've managed to find out is that Sherra hasn't been snatched by the men in black yet. He attacked as soon as I said we knew where Sherra was, even though he'd been staying hidden before. In other words, they don't know where she is. So even though he knew we might have been bluffing, he couldn't afford to leave us be. Before I said that, he even seemed willing to let us go if we gave up."

"You're right."

But even as I thought it over, there were things that didn't quite match up. The men in black should have at least known that Sherra would move towards Bezeld once they blew up her home. In that case, it made sense that this sentry-cum-assassin was posted here a day ago. And in *that* case...

How did Sherra get by? Or maybe she wasn't headed to Bezeld after all?

Whatever Sherra had done, our only choice was to keep going straight.

"Anyway, let's get going. To Bezeld," I said, taking a step forward. Gourry followed.

It was twilight and we were still walking along the same dreary forest path when Gourry suddenly decided to open his mouth. "But Lina. You know, about the men in black clothes we've been fighting, and those two... um. .. whoever..."

"Luke and Milina."

"Right, right. Those two. Who do you think they are?"

"Who...? I said it yesterday, while we were fighting the two men in black. It's pretty obvious they're the secret service of some kingdom or lordship."

"You said that?"

"Where were you when I was talking to Zain?"

"But you weren't talking to me. Of course I can't remember," Gourry said, pouting. I couldn't believe he was actually being serious.

"...Anyway," I said, struggling to rein in my disbelief at his stupidity, "that's probably who the men in black are. And Luke and Milina are probably just mercenaries, after treasure just like us."

"Hmm... Then the treasure Sherra knows about probably isn't a sword, right?"

"Why would you say that?" I asked, frowning slightly.

"Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? If the men in black are from a king or lord's secret forces, why would they go to so much trouble for just a sword?"

I let out sighed and gave a little nod. "Good for you, Gourry. It looks like you do have a brain. Somewhat."

"Somewhat?"

"Look, Gourry. You don't know just how valuable a legendary weapon would be. Am I right?"

"Huh? But even if someone did have a great weapon, it wouldn't be of any use if you just shot a spell at him from far away, right?"

"You're right about that, but that's just in terms of battle. The real value of an ancient enchanted weapon lies in the secrets of its making."

"...What?"

"In other words, legendary weapons are items which can't be reproduced with modern magecraft. If you discovered such an object and reverse engineered it to figure out the magic behind the enchantment, it'd be far more valuable than any old pile of gold. Remember how Amelia and Zelgadis used a spell called Astral Vine to temporarily imbue their weapons with magic?"

"Who're Amelia and Zelgadis?"

I actually tripped over my own feet in surprise, barely managing to catch myself before I fell over. "Y, you..." I stammered, shooting him a glare that could melt steel. " Gourry! You idiot!"

"I was joking, relax. How could I forget the people I journeyed with for so long?"

"It doesn't sound like a joke coming from you. Honestly!" I snapped. "Anyway, the spell they used was actually developed long ago by a sorcerer who managed to reverse engineer the spell out of a sword he found."

"Really?"

"Though on the other hand, there are many cases where the would-be researchers fail to find anything they can understand about the weapon's crafting. It's kind of a gamble, I guess, but worth it. Even if you can't get any knowledge from it, the weapon itself is still there. At the very least, you can use it as bragging rights."

"But to kill people just for that..."

"Come on, Gourry. A single weapon of old could bring in enough money for a whole family to live comfortably

for the rest of their lives. Of course there'd be people willing to kill for such a thing."

"A whole family? They're that expensive?"

"Of course. They're not called legendary for nothing, you know."

Gourry thought about that for a minute before replying. "I was just asking, because I knew a girl once who asked me to sell the Sword of Light to her for five hundred and fifty copper pieces, you see."

I stopped dead in my tracks, twitching. Why'd he have to remember that, of all things?

"*Anyway*," I said, gritting my teeth, "that's why there's nothing strange about the men in black looking for a sword."

"All right." Gourry nodded. He took a few more steps and stopped suddenly.

"Wait," he said, slowly turning to face me. "Do you mean that we have to keep on fighting guys like those men in black clothes?"

"Most probably, yes."

"What do you mean, most probably?! What're you thinking? You don't even know how many of them there are!"

"Well, true. But if you fight with all your might, then I'm sure we'll come through. Don't you think?"

"Don't say that so calmly! We don't even know if there *is* a sword or not! I can't fight for that!"

"Oh? Can you really rest easy, knowing that you've given up on Sherra, who's gone who-knows-where?"

Gourry gasped. "That's right... I'd forgotten all about Sherra."

Somehow, I couldn't say I was surprised. "Whether there's really a sword or a hoard of treasure or something else, I can't sleep easy knowing there's something amiss. So..." I gave Gourry a meaningful look.

"Well... I guess..." Gourry grumbled, looking decidedly dissatisfied.

To tell the truth, there was one thing bugging me, though I didn't share it with Gourry. Why had Luke and Milina, and the men in black, chosen *now* to make their move? Glenn's story about the sword was almost twenty years old by now, and for that matter it'd been years since he died and Sherra came to live all by herself.

Since then, it seemed that nobody had approached Sherra about anything regarding a treasure or sword she might know about... so why now? There had to be some kind of event that had triggered the plans of both the two mercenaries and the men in black. In other words, there was still a lot of information that remained unrevealed. I only hoped that things wouldn't get too complicated...

My mind heavy with thoughts, I turned my gaze forward - and stopped dead. "What's that?"

The sky was turning dark, the green woods fading towards black. But in the distance, I could see a stain of faint red color. It wasn't the sunset - it was in the wrong direction for that.

"It's red," Gourry observed, following my gaze. " Wonder if there's a fire?"

Fire... Wait, *fire!?*

"This is no time to be standing around! Don't you realize what this means, Gourry? If that fire is burning down the next town or inn, we're going to have to camp outside tonight! Outside, in the cold!"

"Well, yeah, but there's not much we can do about it..."

"Of course there is! We can hurry up and help put it out. Come on!"

Without waiting for a reply, I began moving my hands in a cross, casting Boost. The talismans on my wrists, my waist and my chest began to glow faintly. Reaching out, I grabbed Gourry's hand in mine and recited a word of power.

"*Raywing!*"

A fierce whirlwind kicked up, forming a barrier of air around us. Soon we were floating in the air, speeding through the sky towards the red blotch in the distance. Even though I was lifting Gourry as well, the power of the Demon's Blood Talismans was more than enough to let the Raywing spell send us flying through the air.

A few minutes later, Gourry let out a little yelp of surprise. "The village!"

Just ahead of us, the village where we'd been planning to spend the night was wreathed in crimson flames. Not just one or two houses - the entire town was engulfed in a huge firestorm. What was going on? The distance and the barrier of wind both made it hard to clearly make out what was going on.

I turned up the power, touching down a short distance away from the village. With the obstructing wind gone, we could finally see what was going on. The shadows darting through the flames, the townspeople running in terror... and the dozens of demons murdering people indiscriminately! Were they behind the fire?

It went without saying that lesser demons and brass demons never naturally formed bands of such numbers. There was someone or something behind the scenes here, controlling them.

But first, we had to take care of the situation at hand.

"Gourry!"

"Right!"

We exchanged nods and rushed off, towards the burning village.

"*Assher Dist!*"

The brass demon vanished in a cloud of black dust as my spell hit it head on, and as one the other demons turned to look at us. Gourry drew his sword and charged , one slash felling a lesser demon with ease. Thankfully, I'd had the sense to cast Astral Vine on his sword before we arrived, and now it was sharp enough to deal with lesser mazoku such as these.

But...

With a roar, one of the lesser demons sent dozens of fireballs flying our way! I dove out of the way, muttering a spell under my breath...

"*Dynast Breath!*"

Damn! There were too many of them!

Both lesser and brass demons were fairly robust as well as resistant to magic. One or two would have been no match for Gourry and I, but against this many, even we had problems. If we'd been in a deserted plain, I might have used Dragon Slave to clear them out, but there were too many townspeople around to even think of that.

"*Goz Vu Row!*" Another brass demon slumped to the ground, but even as I stopped to take a breath, an ominous feeling made itself known behind me! I whipped around, and saw a lesser demon growling angrily at me.

With a deep snarl it gathered arcane fire in front of itself, forming fireballs that floated in the air, waiting to be released.

But suddenly- "*Felzareid!*"

A bolt of light flashed past me and speared through the lesser demon's head!

There was no way Gourry could have done it. I took a quick look around my surroundings and saw a lone

figure standing a short distance away. Her silver hair whipped around in the wind, shining brightly in the firelight.

"Milina?"

It was one of the two mercenaries we'd parted ways with back in the last town. It looked like she was a sorceress, too. Seeing that my attention was focused on her, she drew her long sword from its scabbard and said quietly, "We'll talk later. First, them."

A lesser demon rushed her, but she darted out of the way and left a light wound in its side. The demon snarled in pain and turned to attack again, but Milina was too quick. She dodged easily and cast her next spell: "*Dislash!*"

The demon collapsed lifelessly. Hmm, not bad. Not bad at all... But this was no time to be appreciating someone else's skills! I gathered my thoughts and turned my energies towards demon slaying.

"*Dynast Brass!*"

A bolt of lightning slammed down from the heavens onto the pentagram formed by my spell, frying a hapless brass demon.

An acrid smell, like the stench of something burning, permeated the night air. The bugs began chirping again under the serene light of the full moon. The battle was finally over.

After defeating all the demons, Milina and I went around town, putting out fires, and only now were we able to take a short rest. The mood was anything but festive, though; most of the villagers had managed to run away, but not all. The anguished wails of those who had lost family members and homes filled the air.

"Yo! You weren't half bad, after all!" a voice said, light and unconcerned about the somber atmosphere. It was Milina's would-be sweetheart, the foul tempered Luke.

"What do you mean, weren't half bad?" I snapped. " What happened here?"

Luke just shrugged, not bothered at all by my anger. "I don't know!"

"You don't know?"

"Right. Milina and I were just taking care of some things when the demons swept in out of nowhere. We tried to stand and fight, but there were too many of 'em. The houses started to burn... and then you two arrived. If you hadn't taken so long to get here, maybe the village wouldn't be in ashes right now."

"You've got some nerve! You're the ones who lied to us and went off after Sherra."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't try and play the fool. I know you guys are looking for the sword as well, aren't you?"

"Hey! As well? You mean you two're trying to get your hands on it, too?" Luke said, obviously surprised. Heheh. Caught hook, line and sinker. I fixed a bright smile on my face.

"So it *was* a sword."

"...What? Hey! You! You tricked me!"

Master of the obvious, right there. One of the oldest ones in the book - pretending to trip up and presenting an opening for the other person to walk into. Also, if Luke had given a negative response, I would've been able to make sure that it wasn't a sword, after all.

"I'd heard about the story of Sherra's father and the sword from the innkeeper, so I had my suspicions. Looks like you haven't been able to find Sherra yet."

"Maybe, maybe not," Luke replied guardedly.

"You don't have to be so evasive. I'm not trying to trick you now. I know you were asking around because you said earlier that you were 'taking care of some things' here. You were trying to find out if Sherra had been here. "

"So you've noticed." It wasn't Luke who replied to my words, but Milina. She walked up to us with a frosty smile gracing her features.

"H, hey! Milina!" Luke cried, startled.

"She said we didn't have to be evasive," she said calmly, unconcerned with her partner's surprise.

"Well, yes, but..."

Heh. It looked like he lowered his tail if Milina so much as said boo.

"So how did you two get here? I thought you'd have met the men in black on the way."

"You fought them?" Luke asked.

"Yes, but we weren't able to find anything out about who they were."

Luke sighed. "Are you people idiots?" he said, in the tones reserved for one speaking to either the very young or the very stupid. "Anyone could figure out that there'd likely be an ambush along the path. You should've walked through the forest, not along the big road!"

"Then, you two trudged your way through the woods?"

"Of course."

"Hmm. I'm not so scared of an ambush that might not even be there, that I'd forsake a comfy bed and a tasty meal just to avoid it."

"Who're you saying is scared, huh?"

"You!"

"I never-"

"Luke." It was Milina.

Luke's mouth immediately shut with an audible clack of teeth. Wow. That was what I called training.

"I guess this is no time to be arguing," I said at length, managing to wrestle in my own natural urge to bicker. " But the question is, why did the demons suddenly appear here? There's no way this is some kind of natural occurrence... So, here's what I think. Our ambusher was in cahoots with the men in black, and he summoned a brass demon, too. Do you think this attack might have something to do with them as well?"

Luke and Milina exchanged quick glances. Milina nodded.

"Didn't you know?" she asked. "We don't know the reason, but a large amount of demons have been appearing in Bezeld..."

The situation began when a child was killed by a lone demon while playing in the mountains. Most of the lesser demons that exist on this plane were called here by human summors. I've heard that there are hundreds gathered in and around the Kataart Mountains, but that place is the stronghold of the mazoku and therefore doesn't count.

However, it wasn't like "wild" demons were completely unheard of, even outside the Kataart Mountains. Say, for instance, that a sorcerer summoned a demon to experiment and neglected to banish it once he was done, or a sorcerer died after summoning one. Then the demon would follow its instincts and effectively become a "wild" demon, roving the countryside and generally being a nasty pain in the ass.

The townspeople thought that this was such a case and gathered a group of people to take care of the demon...

but the band, which had more than enough skilled men and women to face one or two brass demons, never returned. Afterwards, several people reported seeing groups of demons in the mountains. Eventually, the Sorcerer's Guild and the army of Kalmaart began looking into it, but so far they'd come up empty-handed.

That was what Milina told us.

"I see." We were in a little field next to the burned village, looking for a place to set up camp. We'd thought about moving to another nearby village, but the villagers had begged us so pitifully that we agreed to stay for the night. "So you think one of the roving demon bands from Bezeld attacked the town?"

Milina just nodded.

"Then what about the republic of Kalmaart? Did any demons attack there?"

"If they did, we didn't hear about it," Luke said, adding a twig to the campfire. "But if a village a fair distance from Bezeld like this one was attacked, it's possible that the Kalmaart Republic's already been destroyed."

"You were headed there because you believed the rumors about the sword were true, weren't you?"

Luke scratched his cheek in lieu of reply, sending a furtive glance to Milina.

"You can talk if you want," Milina said, terse as always .

Luke made a brief face and started his story. "Well... When we started to move, the demons weren't as bad as they are now. There were only rumors that a band sent to destroy the demons around Bezeld had disappeared. But then, for some reason, some people started to say there was a rumor about some guy who'd seen a strange sword in a Bezeld mine once, and that it was connected somehow to this outbreak of demons. So rumors about the sword and the demons together started to make the rounds. Though personally, I have to wonder why a sword discovered 20 years ago would have anything to do with the demons now. I guess rumors are just like that .

"Anyway," he continued, "we were interested in the rumors about the sword. Even if the part about it being somehow related to these demon sightings weren't true,

as long as the sword itself existed, we had a decent chance at getting our hands on a lot of money. We didn't really have anything better to do, so we decided there was nothing to lose and started looking into it. We followed the clues and eventually came to the place where Sherra lived, but she refused all of our attempts to talk to her. Almost like she was hiding something. Because of that, we started thinking, maybe there really is a sword. So just as we decided to settle in and maybe visit her once or twice a day to ask about the sword..."

"We, and the men in black, arrived?"

"Right."

A knot popped inside the fire, the sharp sound echoing in the still night.

"Though we don't know exactly what the men in black are looking for, just the fact that there's an organized group snooping around here makes it more likely that there really is a sword."

"Hmm. I see."

"Anyway, you know how the rest goes. Just as we started to think something might be up, Sherra

disappeared and we decided she was likely headed towards Bezeld. So we started off, too." Luke stole another glance at the now derelict village. "Oh, and don't get me wrong. We told you everything, but don't go thinking we're in this together now or something. It didn't matter much either way, so we told you, but we ain'tt really interested in working together with you."

"Don't worry. The feeling's mutual," I said, waving a hand. I wasn't in the practice of shaking hands with someone I might be facing off against in the near future. Though, the real question was whether or not the sword really existed, and also whether or not Sherra knew about it.

Where in the world was she, anyway...?

I bolted upright in the middle of the night, the sudden chill running down my spine forcing me awake.

My instincts had saved me from attacks in the middle of the night more than once, but this was different somehow. I couldn't explain quite how, but...

It was true that the situation was ripe for an ambush. All the villages we'd passed by in the past two days on our way to Bezeld had shown some signs of damage from demon raids. It'd be stranger if the town we were staying at for the night *wasn't* attacked at some point.

I slipped out of bed and opened a window, thinking to make sure there wasn't anything funny going around outside. The night air, cold and clear, began seeping in. The town was nearly silent under the serene moonlight; all I could hear was faint noise from a far away tavern. In other words, a perfectly normal town at night, nothing out of the ordi...

Wait. What was that?

I thought something - I don't know what, but something - had moved in the extreme corner of my eyesight. I whipped my head to the side, focusing in that direction.

"Was it just my imagination?" I muttered, squinting. Almost as though it had been waiting for me to speak, something shifted in the moonlight.

No, not one something. Two, no, *three* somethings. They were moving from rooftop to rooftop. The shadows and the distance made it hard to tell for sure, but they were far too big to be stray cats. I narrowed my eyes and growled under my breath - many things I might be, but nobody had ever accused Lina Inverse of being particularly patient.

Throwing a cloak on over my pajamas, I grabbed a dagger in one hand and said, "*Levitation!*" The spell did its work and I floated out of the window, into the night sky.

Below me, one of the small shadows soundlessly leapt from one rooftop to the next. Behind it, the other two shadows followed. The single shadow was just starting to move to the next rooftop when it happened - one of the following shadows suddenly moved, and I could hear a thin whisper as something flew through the air. Immediately, the shadow in front lurched violently and stopped.

"Fool. I told you not to kill her," one of the shadows hissed in a low voice - the partner of the thrower.

"I aimed for her leg," the other replied. "She shouldn't be able to move-"

While they argued, the lone shadow began running across the rooftops once more. The pursuers paused, apparently surprised.

"Huh?"

"Imbecile. You missed. Follow her!"

Not while I was watching. Hovering above them, I thrust my hands forward.

"*Lighting!*"

The sudden flare of light, brighter than even the midday sun, burst in front of their eyes!

"*Argh!*"

In the brief flash of the Lighting spell, I'd caught a clear glimpse of two men swathed in black clothes... and thanks to that startled yelp, I knew that voice as well - Zain!

And that meant that the other, smaller shadow could only be...

"Ms. Lina?"

Sherra's voice held no small amount of surprise as she stared up at me. I let go of Levitation and landed lightly beside her.

"Save the greetings for later," I said tersely. "We have to-"

"Take care of us? Amusing."

The voice of the other one - Gal-something - floated over to us even as both of them charged across the rooftops! Their eyes must have gotten over the burst of light, because their movements showed not the slightest hint of hesitation.

"Let's move it! This way!" I shouted, breaking into a sprint. Sherra followed behind me. We had to get back to the inn, wake up Gourry, Luke and Milina...

An ominous feeling at my back washed over me. I trusted my instincts and took a quick step to the side. Good for me - at that instant, something pierced my

cloak and just barely missed me before disappearing into the darkness ahead. Probably a knife, and thrown to kill at that. It looked like they wanted Sherra alive, but their tender concerns clearly didn't extend to me.

Of course, I wasn't inclined to just turn tail and run away.

"*Freeze Arrow!*"

Focusing my energy, I formed a dozen darts of ice and sent them flying behind me. Flare Arrows might be easy to avoid in the night, but these were a different matter.

But at that moment, Zain's voice rang loud in the darkness.

"*Diem Wind!*"

What?!

My hair and cloak whipped wildly in the sudden, stiff breeze. My Freeze Arrows had probably been smashed by the magical wind - he'd been preparing a spell in advance! That meant...

"*Freeze Arrow!*"

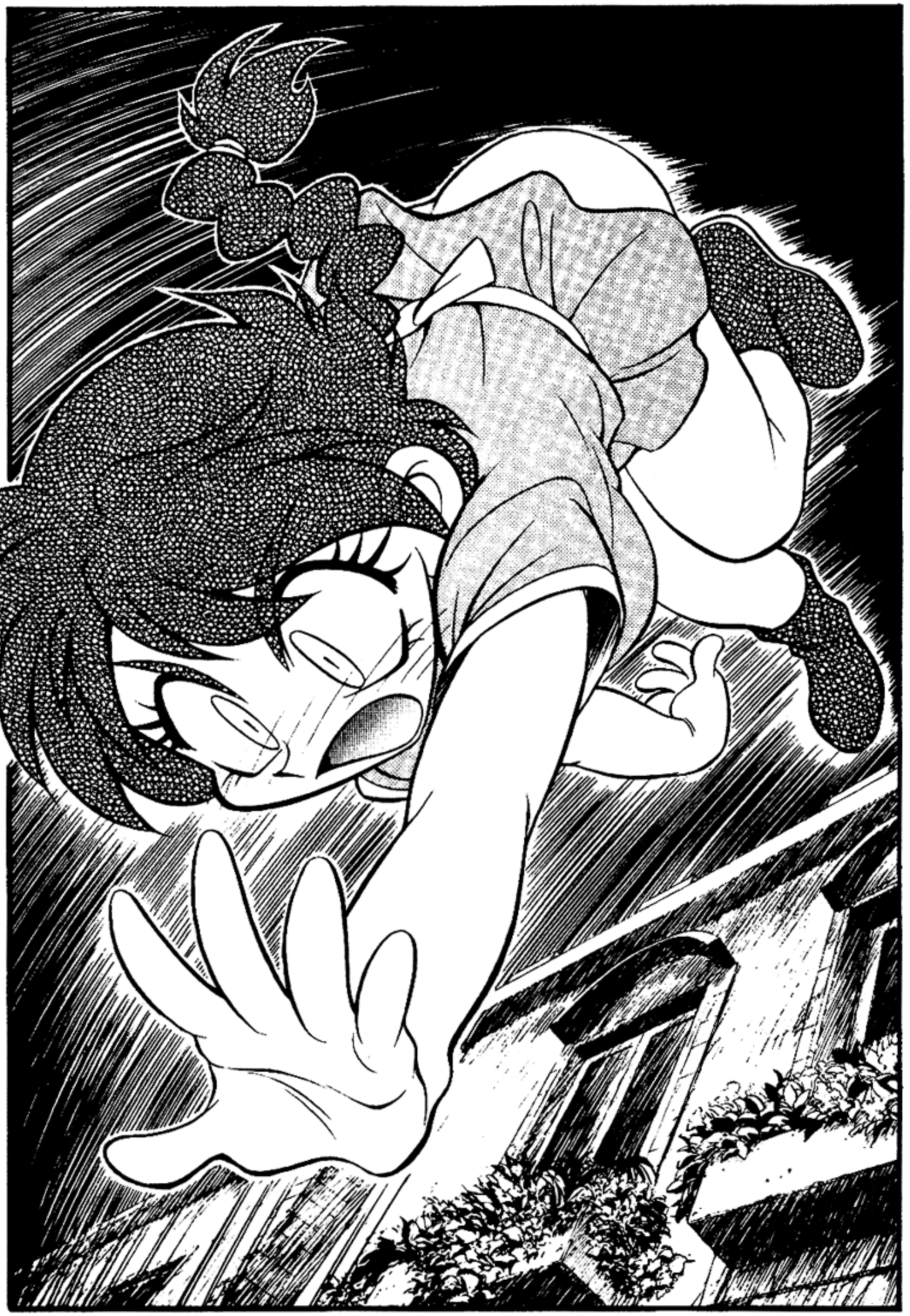
Like I'd thought... Another spell following on the tail of the last one, trying to catch me unaware! Damn it!

I made a snap decision and pushed Sherra, hard. She lost her balance and started sliding down the roof, letting out a little shriek of surprise. I jumped down after her, an ice arrow just barely grazing the tips of my hair as I fell.

Sherra made an ungainly face-first landing in a pile of waste, while I landed lightly beside her. "Are you all right, Sherra?"

"Of course I'm not!"

"Shut up and get moving! We've got to get away!"



"I think that going with you would be far more dange-
"

Sherra's words were interrupted by another volley of Freeze Arrows that shattered harmlessly on the ground next to us.

"*Eeek!*" From the way she darted to my side, I guessed she'd figured out that this wasn't the time for arguing.

"Come on! This way!" I barked, running and muttering my next spell under my breath.

The men in black launched a few more attacks from the rooftops while we ran through the alleys, but we managed to avoid them until my spell completed.

"*Fireball!*" I cried, throwing the orb of flame up towards the moon. Naturally, I knew there was no way I'd hit the men in black with the spell, but that wasn't my intention in the first place.

I snapped my fingers. "*Break!*"

With an earsplitting crack and a blinding flash of light, the Fireball exploded in midair!

"What?"

"What's that?"

The townspeople, startled by the sudden noise and light, began to look out of their windows. Just as I'd planned.

From what I'd gathered so far, I wagered that the men in black preferred to operate secretly. In other words, they wouldn't dare continue this fight if the townspeople began poking their heads out and gawking. So...

"*Fireball!*"

Huh?

Fortunately, my body reacted before my mind did, lurching forward just as the Fireball hit the ground behind me. There was a thundering roar and the houses around me shone red as a wave of heat washed over me. The next thought that flashed through my mind was about what would happen if a Fireball hit the ground near a wooden house... I glanced back and sure enough, the house nearest to the explosion had already caught on fire, the flames licking hungrily upwards.

"Are you insane?!" I yelled, hoping I'd be able to buy some time. I didn't really expect them to reply.

"We're not the ones you should be concerned about, Lina Inverse. After all, you're the one who set this fire."

"*What!?*"

So they thought they'd pin this whole thing on me and slip back into the shadows, huh? As if I'd take that lying down! I started casting my next spell - but before I could finish, the two men appeared at the other end of the alley we were in, running toward us with swords drawn. When did they come down from the rooftops!?

One of the men's hands flickered. Moving more on reflex than thought, my right hand grabbed the edge of my cloak while I spun my body to the side. I could hear two dull impacts against the thick cloth - probably a pair of throwing knives again. And just then, my spell finished casting!

"*Freeze Arrow!*"

My magic coalesced in front of me, forming icy arrows that sped towards the man in black ahead.

This close, there was no way he could avoid them all. Sure enough, one of my arrows slammed into his leg. He let out a short cry of pain as he fell to one knee.

This was my chance. I began my next spell, but before I could finish an ominous feeling came from behind me-

"*Freeze Arrow!*"

I threw myself to the side, pushing Sherra out of the way as I hit the ground and rolled, quickly getting to my feet.

"Hey!" Sherra yelped.

I ignored her complaints, my mind racing. Sherra was a burden to me, sure, but I could tell she was obviously hindering the movements of the men in black as well. It was clear they weren't willing to try any attacks that might possibly miss me and hit - and possibly kill - Sherra. There had been clear hesitation in the men's actions. I prepared a counterattack-

Voices rang out from above me, from the rooftops. "*Freeze Arrow!*"

Not only from directly above, but also from in front of me and behind me. There were *more* of them?

My surprise dulled my reflexes, and I only barely managed to avoid the attack by tackling Sherra head on.

I snapped my hand toward the man directly in front of me. "*Icicle Lance!*"

Still hurting from the spell that had hit his leg, the man in black was unable to avoid my second spell and went down, encased in a block of ice. One down, how many left to go?

I kicked off strongly from the ground, leaping forward and preparing my next spell as I jumped. Or at least, that was the plan. Something tugged hard at my back from behind, unbalancing me and forcing me to my hands and knees. I hadn't even noticed, but one of them must have snuck up behind me!

Sparing a glance over my shoulder, I saw that the end of my cloak was frozen to the ground. It must have been hit by one of the Freeze Arrows from above. Damn!

The man behind me wasn't one to miss that kind of opportunity. He raised his right arm, a throwing knife held in his hand...

And slumped limply to the ground, revealing a familiar, and *very* welcome face standing behind him.

"Gourry!"

"Hey," he said, tipping me a cheerful wink. "You guys were so loud I just had to come and see what all the noise was about."

Above us, I could hear the sound of steel clashing on steel, and soon enough two shadows zipped down from the rooftops to stand in front of us.

"Yo, we're here, too." I recognized that voice. It was Luke and Milina. My reinforcements had arrived!

Still, without knowing how number of the cloaked men, I couldn't rest easy just yet. I summoned a small flame in my hand, melting away the ice pinning my cloak in place.

One of the men half turned to another, still keeping his eyes on us. "Wouldn't it be best to retreat now?" he asked .

"We can't give up yet!" another snapped - Gal-whatever, from the sound of his voice.

Hmm. If the guy who'd pulled back so promptly back then was making stand now, that probably meant they had some kind of ace up their sleeves.

Luke stepped forward before I could do anything, his hand on his sword. "Heh! So you think you can take us, huh? Bring it on! We'll mop the floor with all of you!"

And the wall in front of us exploded. Chunks of mortar and brick showered everyone, making us step back reflexively.

"What was that?"

A low growl came from within the cloud of debris, as if to answer Luke's startled cry. No, not just from in front of us... behind us as well, stretching into the darkness of the alley at our backs.

"*Lighting!*" I cried hastily, forcibly illuminating the alley...

And revealing the hulking forms of nearly a dozen demons surrounding us.

Chapter 3 - Magic Sword? Finders, Keepers!

"*Eeeeek!*"

Well, I couldn't blame Sherra for shrieking in surprise. Even *I* was pretty shocked, faced with a small army of minor demons.

The demons, agitated by Sherra's outburst, turned as one to face us. With Sherra gasping beside me, I quietly cast a spell, but the demons all roared in unison before I could finish! An impossible number of spells flew through the air straight at us, far too many to possibly dodge.

Luke stepped forward, drawing his sword. A dim glow came into existence around the blade - was it a magic sword? Raising his weapon high, he cried, "*Demon Gale Strike!*" and swung down. A pale plane of air tore through the air, easily dispersing the spells headed our way. What *was* that? Diem Wind?

Hmm...

Luke turned to face us, beaming with pride. "Did you see that, Milina? I-"

"Brag later," Milina interrupted, leaving Luke standing with a crestfallen expression on his face.

I was only dimly aware of their exchange, though - I was far more concerned with what Luke had done just moments ago. Without any discernible casting, without any visible preparation, his sword had produced a spell with power equal to, or even greater than, a Diem Wind. A magic sword of considerable power, then. Even if producing Diem Wind was all it could do, it still meant that the sword gave its wielder the ability to take on incorporeal beings like pure mazoku.

I'd have to buy it from him later - cheaply, of course. But this was no time for price haggling. First, we had to take care of the enemies in front of us.

"*Astral Break!*" Milina said, taking the initiative. A lesser demon took the full brunt of her spell and soundlessly dissolved into a pile of dust. Simultaneously, Luke and Gourry charged at the demons to both sides, their swords held ready. And... last, but not least, I let loose my magic!

"*Zelas Brid!*" A ribbon of light shot out of my hand, cleanly impaling two demons at once. Following my will,

the spell changed direction, killing another demon before disippating silently into the night air. I could hear heavy thuds in the darkness - Gourry and Luke had both taken care of one each. That left...

"Above you!"

Milina's warning barely registered to my senses before a shadow above me blocked out the moon. I leaped back just in time to avoid being squashed by a lesser demon. They were on the rooftops, too? I scrambled to my feet, falling into a ready stance, but the demon wasn't looking at me. Its eyes were fixed on Sherra, instead.

Damn! Neither Milina or I would be able to get a spell ready in time...

The lesser demon raised its right arm high, its claws glinting wickedly in the moonlight.

Instead of running away like I'd hoped, Sherra actually moved forward, stepping in front of the demon and planting her right fist squarely in the demon's flank. It didn't even look like a very strong punch, but the lesser demon twitched once... and fell over without a sound, unmoving. What in the world?

"Nobody told me she was that strong..." I muttered.

Sherra must have heard me, because she flushed, her voice taking on a slight hint of embarrassment. "I do not recall ever saying I was weak," she said defensively, her fingers playing nervously with her pigtail.

Come to think of it, it *had* looked like she avoided the knife just a few minutes ago...

Anyway, that meant there was just one less thing to worry about. I turned my attention back to the fight. Let's see... how many were left?

"Gourry! How many left on your side?" I called over my shoulder. Probably no more than two or three, knowing his skills, but it was always prudent to check.

"I don't know! There's two or three left over here!"

Not quite what I'd been expecting. What did he mean by, *over here?*

"Same here!" Luke shouted, apparently having overheard us. "But I think I can hear a commotion a few blocks over, too! You think there's other groups of demons in the village?"

Other groups? I couldn't hear anything except the demons we were fighting, but I could make sure easily enough.

"*Raywing!*" I said, rising straight up into the night sky. I looked around and-

"What?!"

I almost lost control of my spell in my surprise, the barrier of wind wavering unsteadily. There were flames shooting up all over the town! I couldn't make anything out clearly, but if this was all the work of demons, that means there might be a hundred or more scattered across the area. I'd thought that the demons had been summoned by the men in black, but that obviously wasn't the case.

The exact number varied according to the caster, but it was common knowledge that most sorcerers could only summon and reliably control up to two minor demons at a time. In other words, if the men in black were behind this, it meant they numbered at least two or three score. With numbers like that, they wouldn't have needed to summon demons in the first place - they'd have been more than a match for the five of us.

Still... they'd appeared too suddenly for it to have been a random attack by a band of wild demons. There would have been some sort of uproar as they approached from outside, but from my vantage point high in the iar, I could see flames rising from all over, not just at the outskirts of town. What in the world was going on?

A dim light made itself known at the corner of my eye. It was close - disturbingly so. Reflexively, I turned to stare at it, and just glimpsed a black silhouette in the small flare. One of the men in black? Wait, that meant the light was...

A Fireball!

I dropped just as he threw the spell at me. I almost made it... but the Fireball exploded above me, the force of the explosion driving me straight into the wall of a house . I bounced off of it and slammed into the ground. If not for the barrier of air still surrounding me, I might have been seriously injured, or worse.

Shaking cobwebs from my vision, I got to my feet, dispelling Raywing and leaning for support against the

wall. "Look out, all of you!" I called. "The men in black are still around! They might try to sneak up on us while we're busy with these demons!"

In a situation like this, the men in black would be able to act with impunity; any damage they caused would be chalked up to the demons.

"On the rooftops as well?" Milina asked. I nodded.

"There was one up there."

"Then we should take care of him first," she said, coming to stand beside me.

"Right."

I gave her a curt nod and we both started preparing our spells.

"*Levitation!*"

Milina's spell must have had some sort of modification , because we started rising far faster than normal. Not as fast as Raywing, but much faster than usual for a Levitation spell.

Soon, were above the roofs. I took a look around, and... there! A hint of movement in the moonlight was all it took for me to see them. I grinned, letting loose the spell I'd already prepared in that direction.

"Dam Brass!"

The man in black jumped to the side just before my spell collapsed the part of the roof he was standing on... but the area where he landed caved in as well! My Dam Brass had been enhanced with my talismans, the destructive power of the structure demolishing spell becoming far greater than normal.

The man tried desperately to retain his footing, but he had nowhere to go and fell through the hole caused by his own weight. He managed to land on his feet with a dull thud, but unfortunately for him, he'd landed right next to a lesser demon! With a low growl, it let loose with a volley of Flare Arrows, engulfing the man in hungry crimson flames.

He must have been hiding some sort of black powder in his clothes. With an earsplitting boom, the man actually exploded in a ball of fire, taking the demon with him.

With this, I could be sure the men in black weren't working together with the demons. There were sure to be more hiding in the area, but for now I couldn't see them. Our work done, Milina and I descended.

"Almost done over here!" Luke called as soon as we landed.

"Here, too!" Gourry cried. It looked like the situation was well under control... here, at least. But there were still a lot of demons in town.

"All right! Let's keep up the pace and beat up the rest of these freaks!"

I received three enthusiastic affirmatives, and one disbelieving shriek, courtesy of Sherra, in reply.

"Goo... guh... g'mornin..." I said slowly, still rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"It's lunchtime," Milina replied, as calm as always. Everyone, even Sherra, was already gathered at the table.

I shrugged. "Can't help it. We only got to bed around dawn, after all. Hey, innkeeper? Can I get a chicken and steak set, a fried fish set, and a noodle soup over here?"

Having ordered a light breakfast, I sat down next to Gourry.

Last night - well, technically speaking, this morning - the sun had begun to rise by the time the last demon dissolved into dust.

of course, we hadn't been the only ones out there than night. Soldiers from neighboring large cities and mages from the Sorcerer's Guild had been there as well, fighting alongside us. A lot of the town had been demolished, but at least we'd managed to take care of all the demons and keep the town from being completely destroyed. Thankfully, the inn we'd been staying at had been untouched.

But...

"But we lost the men in black," Luke grumbled, spearing a piece of cream sautéed flounder with his fork.

"Yeah. Looks like all we really managed to do was protect Sherra."

"Excuse me? *Protect?*" Sherra asked, giving me a pointed stare. "Forgive me, Miss Lina. I was not aware that shoving people off of rooftops and forcing them to fight dozens of lesser demons passed for *protecting*."

Bah! What a smartass! "Well... umm... right! I just did that because I knew how skilled your really were, all along!"

Sherra just rolled her eyes and gave a derisive snort.

"Anyway," Gourry interrupted, fixing Sherra with his gaze. "Don't you think it's about time you told us about yourself?"

"Umm..." Sherra looked away, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"I think I remember Lina telling me about you, but I wasn't listening at all, so..."

I slammed my fist on the table, completely flabbergasted.

"You weren't listening at *all!?*"

"Well... heheh. Yeah," Gourry said, scratching the back of his head and laughing sheepishly. "Uhh... well, I might have *heard* it, but I don't really remember a thing, so technically it's the same as if I'd never paid attention in the first place..."

"Stop stammering! Wait, does that mean you've just been following me around without thinking at all?"

"Umm... I guess?"

"I told you not to stammer!" I shouted, driving my elbow into his temple. "Listen up, because I'm only saying it again for you once! I wanted to get a magic sword for you, so we're following Sherra around and being nice to her because she looks like she might have one and we have to get on her good side, okay?"

"My, you really *are* phrasing it quite simply," Sherra said, looking annoyed for some reason. Couldn't imagine why.

Anyway. "So, all joking aside..."

"Was it? Was it really a joke? What you just said?"

"*All joking aside*," I gritted, ignoring Sherra, "I bet you have your own worries and concerns. Probably a lot of stuff you don't want to talk about. But I don't think this is the kind of situation that'll go away just because you try to ignore it."

Sherra pointedly ignored me, deliberately fixing her gaze somewhere else.

I tried harder. "Look, Sherra. This is just a guess, but... you know something about what's going on, don't you? There's something about the sword in Bezeld that's related to the sudden appearance of demons..."

"What?" Luke shouted, unable to contain his surprise. Beside him, Milina merely raised one pale eyebrow. Gourry, of course, stayed blissfully unaware as always.

Sherra just let out a heavy sigh and said nothing, a silence falling over our group.

The innkeeper came with our food, but through a supreme exertion of willpower, I ignored it and stayed where I was, quietly looking at Sherra.

At length, Sherra opened her mouth. "That... well..." she said reluctantly. "When he was drunk, my father... always used to say that the sword was something that should never have been brought into this world."

Bingo. It *was* a sword.

With another superhuman effort, I kept myself from grabbing Sherra by the collar and shaking her until she spilled everything about the sword.

"He said it was a sword that created evil... a thing that should never see the light of day..."

"A sword that... *creates* evil?"

We all leaned in closer unconsciously.

"Yes. He didn't tell me the details, but if what he said truly does have something to do with the sudden appearance of demons... If someone, or something, has unleashed the powers of the sword... then I must put a stop to it," she said, more to herself than to us.

"I see. So you're heading towards Bezeld to try and do something about it by yourself?"

Sherra nodded.

"But do you know how you're going to go about doing it?" Milina asked quietly.

"Well... umm..." Sherra stammered, biting her lip. Normally, there would have been an awkward silence, but Luke took care of that for us.

"All right, Sherra! Leave it to us! We'll take care of it!" he cried, banging his chest with one fist.

"Do you have anything to stake your word on?" Milina asked, looking mildly annoyed.

"Nope!" Luke said, not looking the least bit cowed. "I don't, but my word is my honor! That's what it means to be a man!"

"Silly and childish," Milina said, a small smile appearing on her face. "Silly, but I can't say I dislike that side of you."

"You can't say you dislike it?" Luke repeated, his eyes shining. "Does that mean you're finally ready to accept my love?"

Milina's tone turned brisk once more. "We don't have time to joke around. Let's hear the rest of what you have to say."

"Jo, joke around? I wasn't joking..." Luke sniffled, looking heartbroken. His sadness didn't last long, though .

"Bah! Though you might be cold to me now, the day will come when my efforts bear fruit! I'll never give up!" he shouted suddenly, in such a loud voice that everyone turned to look at us. Apparently the word " embarrassment" wasn't in Luke's dictionary... though it *was* in mine.

I had to change the subject. If I didn't, who knows what kind of sappy nonsense Luke might start spouting?

"But anyway, assuming that the sword is literally a sword that 'creates evil,' and it's behind the sudden rash of demon appearances, it's not such a stretch to see why the men in black are after it... Since they're probably the secret force of some king or lord."

"Why's that?" Gourry asked, tilting his head to one side.

"You really don't understand? it's because a sword like that has lots of potential for military use."

"Military use? But didn't you say it created demons? Why would anyone want to bring something that dangerous to their home?"

"That's why they'd do the opposite. For example, you could hide the sword in an enemy country's lands and set it to automatically summon demons. Then that country's military force would be worn thin without you having to even lift a finger. You could take that opportunity to invade, or even absorb the lands into your own under the pretense of helping them rebuild. In other words, it's much, much more effective and efficient than going to war."

"Wow, I see. It's amazing how you come up with sinister plans like that so eas... err, I mean, it's nothing. Never mind." Gourry's sudden silence might have had something to do with the venomous glare I sent his way.

"Yeah, the world'd be plunged into chaos if someone as dastardly as Lina Inverse ever got their hands on that sword," Luke commented casually, not one to miss such a ripe opportunity.

"Who're you calling dastardly, huh?"

"Well, I don't think I have to repeat myself."

"Bah!" I opened my mouth to deliver a stinging retort.

"But enough clowning around," Luke said, cutting me off before I could even begin. "Assuming for a moment that a sword like that really exists, there's no way we can let those men get their hands on it."

"Grrr... Well... I guess you're right," I growled, reluctant to let such a slight go unpunished. I couldn't continue the argument now that we'd moved on to more serious topics, though. I silently struggled with the urge to argue, shelved the issue for the moment, and nodded.

"I've got a proposal to make," Luke said.

"A proposal?"

"Mhmm. I just want to make sure with Sherra: if we can put a stop to these demon raids with the sword somehow, then it shouldn't matter what we do with it afterwards, right? As long as nobody uses it for evil, that is. Like say for example that one of us happens to take it."

"What? Ah... yes. I would be reluctant to pay you money, but just taking the sword doesn't seem like it would be so out of the question..." Sherra replied uncertainly. Did she even know how much a magic sword might sell for? Or maybe she thought that a sword that just summoned demons wouldn't be of much worth?

"Good." Luke snapped his fingers and turned to us.

"Next, you two. I'm guessing you wouldn't agree to joining us on the condition that we split the profits from the sword fifty-fifty."

"Right," I said, nodding. We were after the sword solely to use it. Though I guess we could pay Luke and Milina our "half" and take it... losing money like that wouldn't sit well with me, especially when there was the chance we could get it for free.

"So, hear me out. The five of us'll band together to beat the men in black."

"Didn't you just say that we couldn't work together?"

"Let me finish, Miss Lina. We'll join forces to take on those men, and also to take care of this sudden demon invasion. If the sword's still safe and sound once

everything's said and done, the first side to lay hands on it, gets it. The losers give up cleanly, no bad blood. How's that?"

So that's how they were coming out, huh? Well...

"Is that so? I've got to make sure of something before I reply. What if we have to break the sword in order to stop the demon summonings?"

It was only a fleeting moment, but Luke's expression changed before he hastily covered it up.

Luke was in this solely for the money to be gained from selling the sword. In other words, if we had to destroy it to stop the demons from appearing, he'd lose everything. On the other hand, we were out to use it - if the sword really did summon demons uncontrollably, we had nothing to lose from getting rid of it. His proposal had inadvertently turned out to be heavily skewed in our favor.

"Well... uh..." Luke stammered. Pinned by my implacable stare and Sherra's pleading gaze, he laughed awkwardly. "Of... of course that ain't a problem! Putting an end to this mess is what we should be focusing on, after all!"

"Good. We're in. Is that okay with you, Sherra?"

"Of course. Anything that will end the demon attacks. The sword is in an abandoned mine, in the mountains north of Bezeld. I will explain further when we arrive."

"It's settled, then! A truce until this whole chaos is over , no cheating!" I paused and looked over at Luke. "Say. This might seem a bit out of the blue, but your sword is an enchanted one too, isn't it?"

"Huh? Well, yeah. I don't know who made it, though."

Right! My suspicions were confirmed! Now to go into the haggling stage! Hopefully I could get it cheap.

"Hey, look. How about selling that sword to us? Come on, I'll pay you five hundred *thirty* coppers!"

Judging from the dumbfounded expressions on Luke and Milina's faces, they weren't too thrilled.

"What? Five hundred and thirty copper coins?"

"That's right. Quite a bargain, don't you think?"

"*A bargain?*" Luke repeated, clear disbelief in his voice.

Couldn't imagine why. It was only twenty coppers less than what I'd offered for the Sword of Light back when I first met Gourry. I couldn't offer more than that for a sword that could only generate Diem Wind! It was smart bargaining; any merchant would agree. Though for some reason, normal people liked to call it highway robbery...

"I'll have you know that Gourry here handed over a much more impressive sword for only five hundred fifty! Though I don't have it any more..."

"I did not!"

I shot Gourry a venomous glare to shut him up. He glared right back.

"I can't sell my sword at that price," Luke said, leaning back in his chair and kicking his feet up onto the table. " Maybe for five hundred thirty *billion*," he added casually.

It was my turn to be shocked. "Fi, five hundred thirty *billion!?*"

I'd heard some outrageous prices in my time, but... who the hell did he think I was? A king or something?

"I take it you don't want to sell, then."

"Not to a cheapskate like you," Luke shot back.

Mm... Well, so much for that. I'd just have to place my hopes on the sword in Bezeld!

If we found the sword, it was ours for free, but if Luke got to it first, we'd have to pay. Considering the average price of a magic sword, there was an awful lot on the line . Not to mention, we didn't even know where the sword was. Come to think of it, we didn't even know if there *was* a sword in the first place.

All the proof we had that the sword existed was the word of Sherra's drunkard father. It was entirely possible that there wasn't any sword at all, and the demons had come about because of some other, completely unrelated event.

But... to be honest, worrying about that kind of thing was ultimately pointless. For now, a sudden and uneasy alliance, destined to break up from the moment of its birth, had been formed.

The village of Bezeld was ominously still, just as I'd expected from a place where a demon outbreak had begun. The streets were clean, the usual sidewalk merchants hawking their wares nowhere to be seen. Many houses were empty, the inhabitants fled to parts unknown. Stationed around the town were soldiers, their faces hard and cold. A great silence hung over the entire town, and even though it was around lunchtime, practically nobody could be seen in the town square. As if the land itself was shaking with fear.

...At least...

That's what I'd been expecting.

Contrary to my expectations, Bezeld was the very picture of a peaceful and lively town. Merchants had set up stalls all along the streets, horses drew heavy wagons through the crowd, the stores were full of people, and children darted around, their carefree cheers adding to the general hubbub. The only real difference I could tell was that perhaps there were more guards and hired sorcerers around than normal.

From what our innkeeper told us, there had been a scare recently as villagers wondered whether Bezeld would be next in line to be attacked, but as the nearby towns started to fall, the people began to think that perhaps staying where they were would be safer. After all, there were a lot of soldiers stationed at Bezeld, so the townspeople figured that home was as safe a place as any.

Still, as I sat looking down on the village from our rented room, I thought at least it wouldn't have hurt them to look a *little* jittery. Magic lights illuminated the dusky streets, and even from where I was, I could hear the rowdy sounds of merrymaking from the taverns.

It wasn't even close to midnight, but it was a fair ways into the night all the same. If the villagers had been even a little anxious about the possible attack of demons, it was well past time for them to hole up in their houses... but from what I could see, there were plenty of men and women walking around in the dimly lit pathways, seemingly unconcerned. There were even people entering and leaving the inn we were staying-

Wait.

I frowned and squinted, leaning over the windowsill a little. A girl had just left the inn, and from what I'd seen before she disappeared into the darkness, I'd bet good money it'd been Sherra.

There was a good chance the men in black were hiding somewhere in Bezeld, and Sherra surely knew that as well. So why had she left without a word of notice to us? I mulled over it a little. That's right! The innkeeper back at Sherra's town had said she might have been born here. Hmm...

The curiosity inside me reared its ugly head, battering me with questions. Sherra's past had seemed a troubled one so I hadn't asked too many questions, but come to think of it, there were a lot of whos and hows and whys about her that I didn't know the answers to. Who was her mother? Was she really born in Bezeld? My mind produced more queries at a steady rate.

Mmm. I only gave it a moment's thought before snagging my cloak and throwing it over my shoulders, heading downstairs and out into the hallway. After Sherra it was.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I wasn't going after her because of simple curiosity. I'm not the prying type like that. I was just heading after Sherra in case the men in black showed up. Why was I sneaking behind her, unnoticed? Well... that is, I was a *little* curious as to where she was going, and...

Right. That wasn't important. I stepped outside and looked around, hoping for a glimpse of-

There! I caught a glimpse of Sherra in the dim arcane lights, heading away from the inn. I slipped silently into the shadows, following her. She headed a short way along a big street, then turned, entering a side street. I couldn't see her face from where I stood, but from the way she'd paused a little before moving, it almost seemed as though she was nervous. I had only followed her for a little while when she suddenly ducked into an even narrower alley. I guess she had a lot on her mind - she didn't even look over her shoulder once, heading farther and farther away from the center of the village.

Little by little, the tavern lights faded away, the magic flares keeping the dark at bay growing fewer and farther between. She obviously wasn't heading into the best neighborhood. Even as the thought occurred to me, Sherra stopped dead in my tracks. I hid myself hastily, but it wasn't me she'd noticed.

"Oi, little lady. What'sh a shweet girl like yas doin' alone inna place like this?"

It was a group of four men, run of the mill street trash, from the looks of them. One of them swaggered up, his ugly grin made only uglier by his scruffy and unkempt beard.

"'sh not safe fer a girl like yas t'go alone," he slurred, obviously more than a little drunk. "Howsh about me'n me pals here *escort* ya?"

"I'm busy," Sherra replied tersely. "Please stand aside."

"Haw haw!" the man guffawed. "Didja hear that? 'I'm busy,' she says! 'Please stand ash, ash, ashide!' As pretty as yer please!

"I dunno whatcher out here t'do, little lady, but whaddya shay 'bout fergettin' that an' havin' some fun with ush, eh? Whaddya shay?"

"I'm busy." This time, her tones were positively glacial. "Please stand aside."

Heh. Poor fools. They wouldn't know what hit them.

"Aww, don't be shuch a, a, a bitch. C'mere, you," the bearded man said, reaching toward Sherra with one hand.

Just when I expected Sherra to grab the lout's arm and deliver a resounding blow, the bearded man disappeared !

"*Guh!*"

The grunt hadn't come from any of the four men, but from Sherra. She collapsed forward, the bearded man easily catching her limp body.

The man had dodged her blow, ducking under her swing and planting his fist squarely into her kidneys. It wasn't the kind of maneuver I'd expect from a drunken ne'er-do-well... That meant-

I hastily began casting a spell, running out towards the men.

"*Flare Arrow!*"

Two of the men who'd been standing to the side suddenly turned to me, bolts of flame bursting from their hands. With a yelp I threw myself sideways into a nearby alley, the fire splashing harmlessly off the bricks. They'd known I was there!

The bearded man turned away with Sherra as the men who'd attacked me stepped forward. "Lina Inverse, I'll leave you with these two gentlemen. Now if you'll excuse me, Sherra and I must be on our way." His voice was perfectly clear, not even slightly slurred. And familiar, at that... Wait a minute!

"Zain!"

Damn it! I hadn't expected such a secretive group to appear disguised as a bunch of drunkards, especially with their faces unmasked. I shoved the thought away and took a quick breather, considering the situation. Zain disappeared with one of his men into a nearby alley, leaving two enemies behind. Hah! They thought just two men would be enough to keep *me* occupied?

I placed my palm flat against the nearby wall and whispered a word of power under my voice. "*Van Rail!*"

Immediately, tiny spiderwebs of ice branched off from where my hand met the stones, racing off across the ground. Anyone who had the bad luck to be entangled in these magical vines would instantly be bound in place, or worse, completely encased in a block of solid ice.

My thoughts were cut short as a well placed Flare Arrow hit the ground, evaporating the ice. I see - they were holding their spells ready, waiting for me to make a move out of my alley. They were only buying time while Zain made his getaway. Like I'd let them!

I activated my talismans. Darting out from the alley, I thrust my hands forward and cried, "*Diem Wind!*"

Backed by the power of four demon kings, my spell packed a far greater punch than the men had imagined, the fierce howl of wind drowning out even their surprised cries. In a narrow alley like this, the gale became only fiercer, sending them flying away. All right, time to make my move! I ran out into the open, sprinting into the alley Zain and his friend had entered.

A fork in the street loomed suddenly before me. Left? Right? Which way should I go?

A ringing voice from above solved my dilemma for me . "*Freeze Arrow!*"

I dove to the side, barely avoiding the half dozen bolts of ice that speared the ground where I'd been standing. A quick glance upwards revealed the man who'd gone with Zain moments before, looking down at me from a rooftop. Another attempt to stall me, then. Zain was probably already a fair distance away by now - I really didn't have any time to spare fighting this guy.

The choice was clear. I began the incantation for Raywing - I had to get into the air, out of the narrow alleyway. The barrier of air would probably deflect any spells the man above me got off, and I needed the view.

But the man turned away and vanished into the darkness while I was casting.

Damn! That could only mean he didn't feel the need to stall me any longer. In other words, Zain and Sherra were already out of my reach...

"Now what?!" Luke shouted, banging the table with one fist.

I'd searched in vain for Zain and Sherra from the air, but all for naught. Even the two men I'd sent flying with Diem Wind had been gone when I went back to check. I decided it would be hopeless to continue the search by myself and headed back to the inn to explain the situation...

"This ain't something you can just gloss over," Luke continued, obviously incensed. "They're after the information in Sherra's head, y'know! Who knows what kind of horrible things they'll do for it? Are you gonna take responsibility for that?"

Needless to say, I had no witty retort. If I'd just shouted out when I noticed Sherra leaving, or if I hadn't let my guard down when Sherra had been accosted by Zain and his men pretending to be drunkards, this could all have been avoided. Of course, Luke took no heed of my trite demeanor.

"Honestly, if you just didn't let your damned greed get the better of you..."

Milina's quiet voice cut him off cold. "You can complain all you want later. We should all concentrate on finding Sherra first."

"Uh... yeah! Right! Miss Lina, we'll settle this later. Come on, show us the place where you lost her!"

"Right!" I replied, all too happy to lead the way. That's what I'd come back to do in the first place, after all.

With me at the head, the four of us ran into the darkness, on a mission to save Sherra.

"This is the place," I said, stopping at the fork in the road where I'd been stopped by the man on the rooftop. " The kidnappers must have passed by this spot. And no matter how strong Zain is, there's no way he'd be able to run far or fast holding an unconscious girl. That means their hideout is somewhere close by!"

"Right! Then let's split up; we'll take the right side, and you take the left! If something comes up, send a Lighting into the sky," Luke barked. With that, he turned away from us and ran down the right alley before Gourry and I could even say a thing.

"Well, Gourry! Come on, you heard the man."

"Okay!" Gourry replied, following me down the left path.

"But Lina," he said suddenly, "I don't think it'll be very easy to find her even if they're close by."

"Well, you're right."

I nodded. We were surrounded by old, derelict buildings, most probably uninhabited. It was a pretty

safe bet to say that some of them would have basements or attics. It wouldn't be easy searching all of those houses for just one group of men and a girl, not by a long shot.

"But we can't just give up because our chances are slim , though," I continued, drawing my short sword. A flare of mana began gathering at the tip as I pointed it at the house directly in front of us. "We'll just go through them one at a time!"

"*Dam Brass!*"

With a dull roar, my spell blew the door completely off its hinges and we ran in, searching the rooms.

Unfortunately, luck wasn't on our side, and we came up empty handed.

"Next one, then!" I cried, pointing to my next hapless target.

"But Lina, why would Sherra go out alone at night?" Gourry asked, following me into the deserted house.

"Only one person knows the answer to that, and I'm not her," I replied. "Whatever it was, it was urgent enough that she couldn't ignore it, even if it meant going

out alone. Or she might have overestimated her own strength... *or* there might be more to this situation than meets the eye... whatever. This isn't the time for questions. We have to find her first."

The next house was as empty as the first. And the third . And the fourth. And...

I started getting annoyed, bursting in and blowing a hole clear through the ceiling to the roof instead of checking the rooms individually. Each empty house only annoyed me more.

"All right, the next one..." I said. But before we could start moving, the pitch black sky in the distance suddenly lit up. A Lighting spell! It was Luke and Milina !

"Come on, Gourry! Let's go!"

"Right!"

Together, we ran toward the light in the distance, where Luke and Milina were waiting.

We could see a brief flash of light in one of the windows. It looked like the fighting had already started.

The house was fairly large, three stories high. More flashes, probably spellfire, illuminated the third story windows. I'd have liked to charge straight up with a Raywing or Levitation, but the window was too small to burst through with Raywing, and the slow moving Levitation would leave us as sitting ducks if any of the men in black happened to see us. We'd have to run into the house and take the stairs.

The doors were already blown clean off their hinges - probably Luke's doing. There was nobody on the first floor, and nobody on the second floor either. We took the stairs leading up to the third floor-

"Ack!"

The moment I took the last step up to the third floor, a stream of incandescent light passed straight in front of my nose. Passing by me, it slammed into the wall next to us, blowing a gaping hole into the sturdy wood. Dam Brass... I shivered, thinking of what might have happened if I'd been just a little bit faster.

"You're late!" a familiar voice cried, and I half turned to see Luke and Milina.

"We beat two of them, but they're holed up in there and won't come out," Luke explained. There was a long hallway with rooms on both sides. We were on one side, and the men in black were probably making their stand on the other end.

"Are there any on the first and second floors?" I asked.

"None. Only here!"

Hmm. That meant that if we took care of the men here, it'd be over.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's get this over with !"

"It's not that easy! You think we're hiding here because we feel like it?"

The men in black were sending spells down the hall, using its length to their advantage. It'd be suicide to

charge down the hallway, and I couldn't use any of my more destructive spells when Sherra was likely being held captive.

Hmph. A little problem, but nothing insurmountable with a little quick thinking and shrewd application of magical force! I cautiously peeked out, looking down the length of the hall.

"Eek!"

I ducked back, narrowly avoiding the Freeze Arrow that'd been headed straight at my face. Another close call , but I'd confirmed the enemy's positions. One man each in the two rooms at the end of the hall. That meant...

I swiftly turned around, heading back down the stairs and dragging Gourry behind me.

"Huh? Hey! What're you doing? Are you running away?"

I ignored Luke's shouts on my way down to the second floor; I didn't have the time to explain.

"Lina? What *are* you doing?" Gourry asked, apparently as confused as Luke.

"Draw your sword! Get ready to take on the men in black," I replied tersely, heading down the second floor hall.

"What? But Luke said there weren't any men on the second floor..."

"Just shut up and do as I say!"

We entered one of the rooms at the end of the hall. Like I'd thought, the house was constructed in a way that each floor was identical. In other words...

I pointed up at the ceiling and focused my magic. "*Dam Brass!*"

My spell did its work, blowing a hole in the ceiling and raining down a shower of wooden splinters, shards of stone... and one very surprised man in black!

He had only the time to utter one startled cry before Gourry's blade flashed once in the dim light and silenced him. One down, one to go! I ran into the adjecent room and once again cast Dam Brass. This time, however, all that came down was a spray of debris. Standing on the edge of the hole I'd made was a man swathed in black clothes, smirking down at me.

"You fool! Did you think something like that would work twice?"

As it turned out, it was the man in black who was the real fool. A slash from behind dropped him on the spot. He'd thought he'd avoided my attack from below by moving out of the way, but in doing so he'd lost sight of the third story hallway. Naturally, Luke and Milina had taken the chance to run down the hall and attack from the door.

"How're things up there?" I asked.

Luke looked around for a moment. "I think that's all of 'em," he called down. "But I don't see Sherra, either."

"What?"

We made our way back up to the third floor, joining up with our two partners. Inside the room, I could see food stacked at the walls along with other basic supplies. It *had* been their hideout. But like Luke had said, Sherra was nowhere to be seen.

Luke clicked his tongue once in disappointment. "You think they have another hideaway besides this place?"

Hmm... I took a quick look at the supplies stocked in the room before replying. "No, this was the right place. Sherra was here not long ago."

"What? Really?"

"Do you recognize something of hers?" Milina asked.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "All the things here were for the men in black. But take a good look: there's enough here for about ten men. But we only took care of four. That means the rest of the men took Sherra and

made a run for it. Now, here's the question: where do you think they went?"

"Ah."

"I see..."

Luke and Milina both nodded. Gourry scratched his head, hopelessly confused.

"Right," I said, nodding. "They're headed for the mountains to the north, to the sword of Bezeld."

Chapter 4 - The Slumbering Sword Awakens

A bird cried out, somewhere in the forest around us. If not for the arcane light at the tip of my sword, the mountain path in front of us would have been invisible. Now, walking in the dead of night towards a place probably infested by demons wasn't exactly my idea of a night out on the town. But with Sherra kidnapped by the men in black and probably being carried to some place in these very mountains, we didn't really have the option to spend a night at the inn before sallying forth.

We'd heard that the sword was somewhere in the abandoned mines to the north of Bezeld, and that's exactly where we were headed.

It might have been his cantankerous nature or just his own way of letting off stress, but Luke opened his mouth before long, unable to bear the silence. "Hey, d'you really think the men in black're here in the mountains?

"If it turns out that they had some other hideout somewhere in the town, or they're in some other mountain, I'm just gonna close my eyes and pretend none of this ever happened. That's how it's gonna be."

"You mean, that's not how it's been up till now?" Milina quipped. "From what I know of you, that's how you've always been."

"Wha, what?! That ain't true, Milina!" Somehow, Luke's protest didn't sound quite as convincing as he'd probably intended. "I've been an honest man all my life and I'm not gonna change that anytime soon. I've got to be if I wanna live happily ever after with you, y'know?"

"No, I don't."

Apparently at a loss for words, Luke shut up and began dragging his feet, sniffling quietly.

"You guys can have your lover's spat later," I said, pointing ahead. "We're almost at the mines."

"It's not a lover's spat," Milina said sharply, showing more emotion than I'd expected. Ouch. Poor Luke. The schmuck really didn't have a chance.

Silence fell as we walked briskly along the path for a while. Before long the trees began showing more sporadically, and suddenly we found ourselves standing in a wide clearing, a tall sheer wall of stone stretching upwards in front of us.

Like Sherra had said, there were abandoned mine shafts in the mountains. But not just one or two - they dotted the entire rock face, over a dozen at least in the small field of view awarded to us by the magical light. If the rest of the mountain face was like this, and assuming that at least some of these shafts had forks and splits... I couldn't even begin to guess how many places we had to search.

"Well..." Luke said faintly, sounding more than a little overwhelmed. "Looks like there *was* an abandoned mine. "

Beside him, Milina could only nod, looking stunned herself.

Ever the brilliant one, Gourry chose exactly the wrong thing to say in our situation.

"So... which one?"

A *very* awkward silence fell over our party. Come to think of it, Sherra had never said that there was only one abandoned mine, and in fact it was logical to assume that , given the orihalcon boom, there would be a large amount of shafts... Bah.

"Mmm..."

"Well, this is a dilemma."

Luke, Milina and I crossed our arms, our brows furrowing with concentration.

Gourry, on the other hand, simply glanced about for a moment before pointing, seemingly at random, at one of the mine entrances. "Hey, Lina. Doesn't that place look a little suspicious?"

I squinted, but I really couldn't tell anything that distinguished it from the numerous other openings around it. The distance and poor lighting made it hard to tell.

"Suspicious? What do you mean?"

"Well, it looks to me like there's a piece of cloth in front of the cave."

"What?"

I stared at it closely, but I really couldn't tell if there was anything there. "Where?"

"Right there. Can't you see it?"

Luke and Milina followed Gourry's gaze as well, but from the looks of it, they weren't seeing anything either.

"Hmph!" I snapped. "Let's go and see for ourselves up close. It's not like we'll do any better just standing here."

The mine shaft Gourry had pointed out was a little ways up the cliff face, and we really didn't have the time to waste finding a way up.

I placed a hand on Gourry's shoulder and started chanting a spell. "*Levitation!*"

Luke and Milina cast their own spells and came floating up after us.

"Umm... a little to the right. Okay. Straight ahead."

With Gourry guiding us, we made our way to the " suspicious" mine shaft. And hanging at the entrance was. ..

"Well, what do you know," I muttered, grabbing hold of the handkerchief that'd been hanging from the wooden pillars.

"You saw a *handkerchief*, in the dark, at that distance?" Luke said, disbelievingly.

Gourry laughed nervously, scratching the back of his head. "It's nothing, really."

The kerchief was a new one, dry to the touch, the colors bright and vibrant. The problem was...

"Did Sherra leave this as a clue to us, or was it left by the men in black as a decoy to confuse us?" I mused aloud.

Beside me, Milina cast a small Lighting spell, the arcane light coalescing at the tip of her finger. She knelt and studied the floor for a moment before getting back to her feet.

"There are signs that people have been here recently. Lots of people."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she replied, giving me a curt nod.

"All right, then! Let's go!" I said. With Luke lighting the way at the head and Milina following him, and

Gourry bringing up the rear, we ran into the seemingly abandoned shaft. Before long, we came to a fork in the path.

"Which way?" Luke asked.

Milina wordlessly crouched again, staring down at the ground before pointing to the right. Once again we headed deeper into the haphazardly dug mine. The miners, their heads filled with visions of orihalcon, had excavated willy-nilly, the paths twisting and turning like a maze. If Milina was telling the truth, there were signs that some people had advanced deeper and deeper into the mine. Just how many of the men in black were ahead of us?

If Sherra didn't resist, it was possible that the sword was already in the hands of the men in black. In that case , we'd just have to beat them all and take the sword by force.

Without warning, a dull roar sounded in the distance, the mine floor trembling under our feet. From the sound of it, it had come from... directly ahead?

The four of us exchanged quick glances, nodded, and dashed headlong down the path.

"We found them!" I cried triumphantly. The fruit of our efforts shone in front of us - we could see a faint magic light shining around the corner just a few paces ahead.

Needless to say, they probably knew we were coming, too. I prepared a spell under my breath as I ran forward, turning the corner.

Ahead of us stood three men in black! But Sherra was nowhere to be seen. The end of the dim hall was caved in , and in front of the pile of rubble stood the men in black. It was possible that the cave-in had separated them from Sherra.

Luke and Milina stopped, probably wary of incoming spells, but I took no heed and dashed forward.

"*Flare Arrow!*"

Like I'd expected, they'd had attacks ready and waiting for us. Once they confirmed that I hadn't stopped , the men in black let loose their attacks!

But of course, I was expecting that, in turn. Thrusting my hands forward, I let loose the spell I'd been preparing !

With a tortured shriek of air, an incredibly strong wind kicked up in front of me, swirling wildly. It was a Windy Shield, boosted by my talismans. Normally, it might not be much, but with the power of my talismans behind it, my shield became a force to be reckoned with. The incoming Flare Arrows were deflected with ridiculous ease.

I lowered my barrier and-

Luke's voice rang out behind me. "*Fireball!*"

A coruscating ball of light whipped past me, towards the men in black!

Huh?!

A Fireball would be more than enough to take care of the men in black in this situation, but the explosion would reach us as well! And there was nowhere to hide in the narrow mine shaft.

I was still frantically thinking of what to do when the ball of flames exploded with a huge roar, engulfing the three men in front of us and hungrily advancing toward us as well!

"*Flare Shield!*"

The fire stopped right in front of me, held at bay by Milina's words of power. The roaring inferno was close enough to reach out and touch, but the air in front of me was cool.

The spell Milina had cast, Flare Shield, was a fairly high level fire resistance incantation, and very effective. The only problem was that it took quite a while to cast, so it almost never saw use in real battle. It was obvious that Luke and Milina had worked this out in advance.

Once the magical flames guttered out, we beheld...

I gasped in surprise.

The sight we'd been expecting was three men in black lying defeated, but one of them was still standing.

It was clear what had happened. Two of the men had let loose with Flare Arrows, but one had readied a defense spell just in case. Apparently he'd only been able to cover himself. The other two were nowhere to be seen - probably blown away by the force of the explosion. Not only the men, but the pile of rubble blocking the shaft had also been cleared, revealing a path deeper into the mine.

"Not bad," the last man snarled, clearly angry. "I wasn't expecting you to be this fast."

That voice sounded familiar... Zain!

"Maybe I should have taken care of you earlier... However! Your meddling ends here! This time-"

Zain's generic villainous ranting was cut off by a bloodcurdling shriek from deeper inside the mine.

Zain whipped around, not even giving us a second glance as he darted away. "*Sir Galva?*"

Galva? Must have been the Gal-something Zain had been working with before. We looked uneasily at each other, but it was clear there was nothing to be gained from sitting here twiddling our thumbs.

"Come on! Let's follow him!" I shouted, dashing after Zain.

"*Aaaaaargh!!!*"

Galva's tortured cries echoed inside the mine, seemingly without end.

We entered a wide room and stopped short, taking in the strange sight before us. The room was incredibly large, enough to comfortably fit one or two houses and still have room left over. In the center of the room was...

An onyx sword was embedded deep in the dirt. The blade was gently curved while the hilt was simple and straight, without any fancy decorations. The thing seemed to radiate palpable malice, almost suffocating in its intensity.

Galva gripped the sword with both hands, his entire body bent backwards, the screams still being ripped from his throat. Black lightning and obsidian sparks danced across his entire body, radiating outwards from where his hands touched the hilt.

And standing beside him...

Sherra stood watching silently, a faint smirk gracing her features.

Beside us, Zain trembled with shock, too stunned to even notice us.

"What... in the world...?" Gourry managed to say, his words cutting through Galva's screams.

At the sound of Gourry's voice, Sherra let out a startled yelp and quickly turned to look at us. She'd been too wrapped up watching Galva writhing in agony to

notice our entrance. Her eyes widened briefly as she took in all five of us, an expression of blatant surprise on her face.

"Oh dear. You're already here... and all together, at that," she mused aloud, scratching her cheek. She didn't really *sound* all that surprised. Maybe a little disappointed.

"Who... no, *what* are you?" I managed to ask.

Sherra just gave a bitter smile in reply. "Hmm... to tell the truth, I'd been hoping you'd come one by one... Oh well. I guess I'll just have to improvise."

"Hey... hey!" Luke shouted. "Sherra, what're you talking about? What the hell is going on?"

For once, Luke and I were of a like mind. I hadn't the slightest idea of what was going on, but I instinctively realized one thing: our real enemy here was none other than Sherra herself.

Sherra glanced wistfully at Galva - no, at the black sword. "I wanted to try out a few more things, but that will have to wait," she commented, lifting her hand. " Dulgofa. Transform."

A violent crack rent the air as the black lightning began to intensify! And...

"Sir Galva!" Zain cried pitifully.

Completely encased in onyx energy, Galva's body began to change!

His skin swelled, cracked, then split wide open. Through the gaping wound in his body emerged a leg, where no leg should ever have been. Galva wasn't screaming anymore - instead, a strange sound, like the panting of some huge beast, began rising to join the crackle of lightning and Sherra's gleeful laughter.

As we watched, Galva's bowed form suddenly doubled in size.

"Everyone, get out! Run!" I shouted, instinctively realizing the danger.

As though my desperate words had broken a spell holding them in thrall, everyone turned and followed my lead, dashing out of the mine as though our lives depended on it. The rough panting and Sherra's laughter quickly faded to nothing, but instead the rock under our

feet began to tremble ominously. Even as we ran, the vibrations became stronger, as though whatever was causing the tremors was getting closer and closer. It was almost as if the mountain itself was shaking. Would we make it?

We struggled to keep our footing as we ran. Gourry, Luke, Milina, myself... and Zain, the man in black. Just moments ago he'd been our enemy, but squabbling amongst ourselves at a time like this would be nothing short of suicide.

Just when it seemed the quaking couldn't get any more violent and the entire mountain would come down around us, we reached the exit, leaping down to the ground below.

"Get out of the way!"

We had barely made it to the relative safety of the forest when the entrance to the mine exploded in a cloud of stone and wood. Something emerged, a huge, black, menacing shadow silhouetted against the moon. It turned its gargantuan head towards the moon and let out a bloodcurdling cry.

It was the thing that had once been the man named Galva.

"What... *is* that?" Milina stammered, her normally calm and composed face pale with fear.

As I stared at the monster howling at the moon, I realized what had happened. Not completely, but I understood enough.

Low level mazoku like lesser and brass demons were created when minor mazoku latched onto the minds of weak-willed lifeforms like animals, transforming and warping their bodies and abilities.

These lesser mazoku were incapable of taking control of fully sentient beings, like humans.

However...

What if, instead of a low-ranking mazoku, a stronger, more mature one made the attempt to control another being?

The answer to that question was right in front of us. It was the size of a large dragon, pitch black even in the moonlight, with ten twisted obsidian legs that would have looked more at home on a spider.

The thing - the *hyper demon* - let loose with one last tortured shriek and began to move.

It was headed straight for Bezeld.

"Oh, no! It's gonna go for the village!"

"Tell me something I don't know! Come on, let's stop it !" I shouted in response to Luke's startled cry.

We had no way of knowing just how powerful the thing was, but it was a safe bet to say it'd be much stronger than a lesser or brass demon. If something like that began running amok in a crowded village...

At the size of a dragon, it was already clear that the weapons of the soldiers stationed in Bezeld would be next to useless.

That left us with only one option: take it down before it got there!

Darkness beyond twilight,
Crimson beyond blood that flows.
Buried in the flow of time,
In thy great name, I pledge myself to darkness.
Let all the fools who stand in our way be destroyed,
By the power you and I possess...!

Milina whipped around to stare at me, her eyes wide with surprise. "Isn't that...?"

Right. The only spell that drew on the power of this plane's Demon King, Ruby Eye Shabranigdu.

"Dragon Slave!"

A cone of incandescent scarlet light burst forth from my palms, streaking towards the hyper demon and enveloping it in a huge explosion.

The dust settled, and Luke gasped in disbelief. "It's still standing?"

My Dragon Slave hadn't moved the hyper demon an inch - it stood still, exactly where it had been before.

"It's hurt, though," Milina commented, having regained some of her composure.

She was right. Though it hadn't been blown to bits like I'd expected, but the mishapen lump of flesh that formed the hyper demon's body was missing a huge chunk. Its nature as a mazoku must have shielded it slightly from Ruby Eye's power, but it hadn't been enough to protect it completely. Right! So it was just a matter of letting loose with more Dragon Slaves until it died.

I had just started gathering my power again when the hyper demon twitched. Had my spell had more effect than I thought?

Apparently not. The hyper demon wriggled once, and the missing piece of its body suddenly grew back with astonishing speed.

"Huh?"

I rubbed my eyes despite myself, unable to accept what I'd just seen.

"I don't believe it," Luke muttered faintly. The others just stared dumbly, at a loss for words.

Just a few seconds after my Dragon Slave made a direct hit, I couldn't even tell where the wound had been. Not even trolls, famous for their powers of regeneration, could match that.

Almost casually, the hyper demon began moving toward Bezeld again, as though nothing had happened.

"So..." Gourry scratched his cheek. "What now?"

"What now?" I replied, my mind whirling. "Well, we... err... I don't know. What now?"

I'd met a few beings in my time who hadn't gone down with one Dragon Slave. There had even been some who had blocked the spell. But this was the first time I'd ever met one who could take a blast full on and recover from it so quickly. This just wasn't fair. Just how powerful *was* this thing?

Even fairly high level mazoku would take *some* damage from the full force of a Dragon Slave, and none could recover from that sort of damage quickly. It was impossible.

Not quite impossible for the hyper demon, it seemed. For once I was completely stumped. Stunned, even.

Milina was the first one to come to her senses.

"We can worry about how to bring it down later. For now we'll have to settle on slowing it down somehow." Without waiting for a reply, she sprinted off after the hyper demon, followed a moment later by Luke.

"Gourry! Come on!"

"Okay!"

With that, the four of us...

...Four?

Huh?! Zain had disappeared without a word while we were talking amongst ourselves!

Well, his mission *was* only to secure the sword. He had no reason to fight against the hyper demon alongside us, and to tell the truth, I hadn't really expected him to help us in the first place.

For now, our mission was to slow down or stop the hyper demon before it got to Bezeld, and figure out a way to take it down for good!

Our mission clear, we ran through the forest, following the black shadow in the distance.

"Take this!"

Gourry darted in, his sword a flashing silver arc in the moonlight. His strike sliced cleanly through one of the

hyper demon's humongous legs, almost as thick as tree trunks.

But before we could even begin to hope that his cut had done the trick, writhing tentacles sprouted from both severed ends of the leg, instantly bringing it back together! It was actually an incredibly disturbing sight up close - perhaps it was for the best that we hadn't been able to clearly see the monster recover from my Dragon Slave a few moments ago.

As for the demon itself, it continued lumbering along, seemingly unaware that one of its legs had briefly been cloven in two. The thing was literally unstoppable.

Gourry stepped back a few paces, shaking his head. "I can cut it well enough, but it's no use..."

"Let me give it a try!" Luke's sword glowed with power as it generated a shrieking blade of wind, easily slicing through the hyper demon's legs... to no avail.

"Ehh... Can't say I wasn't expecting that," Luke muttered to himself, sheepishly scratching his head. The blockhead.

Milina let loose with a barrage of Freeze Arrows that impacted solidly on all of the monster's legs, but not even a film of frost formed. She had the right idea, but it looked like that level of shamanistic magic just wouldn't cut it.

My turn! "*Zelas Brid!*"

The ribbon of light utterly vaporized two of the creature's hairy legs, but almost immediately they grew back, sprouting from the severed ends like grotesque plants. Just what would it take to bring this thing down?

We might be able to buy a little time by blowing all of its legs away with a Dragon Slave, but that's all it would be: buying time. Two or three in quick succession might do the trick, but it was a sure bet that the hyper demon would regenerate faster than I could cast.

I *did* know of one spell even stronger than Dragon Slave that would surely do the job, but... I *really* didn't want to use that one...

Wait a minute. Maybe...

"Everyone! Get clear! I'm going to try something big!" I shouted, activating my talismans. With the power of four Demon Kings behind it, who knew just how destructive a Dragon Slave could be? Surely it would be more than enough to reduce the demon to dust and ashes!

Gathering the power lent to me by the arcane artifacts, I finished my incantation.

"*DRAGON SLAVE!*"

An explosion much bigger than the one before briefly turned the night into day. We shielded our eyes from the sudden light and peered through the cloud of debris...

"It's working!"

The demon's body wasn't quite destroyed, but more than half of it had been utterly blown away, and-

It grew back.

"Oh, *come on!*" I cried, grabbing my head with both hands in frustration. "You've got to be kidding me!" How could anything regenerate so quickly?

Though... come to think of it, that pattern of regrowth was somewhat familiar...

Utterly ignoring our efforts, the demon crawled onwards, toward Bezeld. Before long it'd be at the town itself!

Suddenly, a burst of light flared in the distance. It was from the town itself.

A quick glance in that direction revealed a barrage of tiny red flashes coming from Bezeld's outskirts, all heading toward the hyper demon!

"Flare Arrows!" I said aloud, my eyes widening. There must have been hundreds - no, thousands of them! With a thundering crash, they all slammed into the demon's body.

"It must be the guards stationed at the town," Gourry said from beside me.

There was no way the garrison there could have failed to notice a monster the size of a small mountain heading their way, especially not with someone chucking Dragon

Slaves at it. They must have gathered every sorcerer in the town and bombarded it with Flare Arrows... to no effect. The hyper demon advanced ever closer.

Even more spells flew through the air, but most of them splashed harmlessly off the monster's hide, and even the ones that did get through were healed in an instant. Was there any way to kill this thing?

There had better be, because the hyper demon had already reached the edges of Bezeld!

Bezeld was a bedlam of horrific confusion, chaos reigning as shouts and screams filled the air. Sorcerers desperately cast spell after spell at the colossus looming close, but nothing worked. The normal guards, of course, could do nothing against a creature of this size. As for the townspeople, they were paralyzed with fear, having realized that this was a monster beyond the abilities of their protectors.

The soldiers tried their best to give orders, but their efforts were futile, their words buried beneath the villagers' screams.

This was the scene that greeted us when we arrived, having used a levitation spell to get there before the demon. The problem was that we had nothing that could stop the thing.

Even another Dragon Slave would be next to useless. There *had* to be *some* way to kill this monster... but how? A faint memory danced frustratingly at the edges of my mind, but even as I tried to remember, the hyper demon finally reached the group of guards defending the town!

The first line of mages broke pathetically as the black mass passed over them. The hyper demon had yet to attack, but the menacing air radiating from it wasn't reassuring in the slightest.

"Don't give up! Keep casting! The thing's got to be hurting!" a man shouted to the fleeing sorcerers, in a futile attempt to rally their shattered will. From the decorations on his armor, he seemed to be a captain of some sort.

A wicked hiss of displaced air followed by a meaty *thunk* cut him off as he tried to say more. The captain could only manage a strangled cry in the sudden silence as everyone seemed to freeze, staring up at the hyper demon.

A single long tentacle, tipped with a wicked hooked claw, had extended out from the monster's main body, completely impaling the captain, armor and all. As we watched in fascinated horror, the doomed man twitched once and suddenly *shriveled*, his flushed skin turning first pale, then sunken and dry. It was as though the tentacle had drained his very life, reducing the young man to an old and wizened mummy in an instant.

"*Elmekia*-"

One of the sorcerers broke out of his shock and began casting, but before he could even finish, another tentacle - this one without a hook - darted out and wrapped itself around his body. Not just him - dozens of limbs suddenly began to sprout from the hyper demon's body, entangling soldier and mage alike. They were thick as a child's wrist... I could easily imagine the brute strength inside them.

Heedless of the people's startled cries, the tentacles contracted, drawing the hapless men and women close to its body. Even as they struggled to get free, more grotesque segments, these ones fanged like horribly deformed snakes, burst out of the monster's body and bit into its victims!

Tortured shrieks filled the air. The remaining guards, their will to fight completely drained, turned tail and fled . But I took no notice. I'd finally remembered where I'd seen this kind of gross and unnatural regeneration.

It was in the city Gourry and I had visited once, Atlas.

Raugnut Rushavna.

The curse that only mazoku could cast, bestowing dreadful immortality to the human unlucky enough to be its target. The doomed man or woman would become a featureless mass of pulsing flesh, doomed to a deathless eternity of unspeakable agony. There was no known way to reverse the effects - only killing the mazoku who had cast the curse would allow the victim to die, bringing their tortured existence to an end. A spell that really earned its name as *black* magic.

If Galva had been consumed by Raugnut Rushvana, then the monster's incredible powers of regeneration were understandable. But that meant the only way to stop this thing would be to destroy the mazoku who had created it...

A loud crash and a new wave of screaming broke into my thoughts.

The hyper demon was loose inside the town proper!

Finally inside Bezeld, the monster ran amok, its countless tentacles indiscriminately grabbing townspeople and pulling them in to be consumed.

It wasn't exactly the most destructive thing I'd ever encountered, but it was a serious contender for most tenacious. I gave it another try...

"*Blast Ash!*"

A black void formed around one of the hyper demon's tentacles, reducing half of it to ashes. But even as those ashes drifted to the ground, two smaller limbs sprouted from the destroyed end, intertwining and merging seamlessly to reform the part I'd blown away. Even the extremities possessed the same regenerative powers! This thing was looking more and more like the textbook definition of "indestructible" by the minute.

A Dragon Slave was out of the question in this crowded town, and I'd already seen how it would turn out anyway. Damn!

"Can you think of a way to stop it, Lina?" Gourry asked.

"Can I think of a way to stop it?" I repeated, giving him an incredulous look. What did it *look* like I'd been doing?

A normal human afflicted by Raugnut Rushavna wouldn't grow to such colossal sizes and rampage like this, and a mazoku wouldn't possess such preposterous regeneration. This thing was a fusion of the two.

...Wait. A fusion...

"Everyone, cover me!"

I began a long incantation and ran straight at the hyper demon!

"Hey! Wait, Lina!"

"Cover you? What're you thinking?"

I was too busy dodging the tentacles suddenly coming my way to reply. I don't know if the demon sensed me, or if it had just chosen me randomly as a target, but if I didn't get some help soon...!

"*Rune Flare!*"

Just in time! Milina's lance of fire speared through one of the appendages trying to grab me, while Gourry and Luke hacked swiftly at the others. I took the opportunity to advance even closer, my incantation now half finished.

"Lina!" Gourry shouted from behind me. "You've gone too far! Come back!"

I ignored him, each step taking me closer to the heaving black mass of the monster's body. I just hoped my hunch turned out to be right.

More tentacles drew close, but they wouldn't be enough to catch me. I twisted to the side at the last moment, avoiding them-

Huh?

Something grabbed hold of my ankle, nearly making me fall over. I looked down and saw a fleshy vine wrapped around my foot - one of them had snuck up on me!

I barely managed to keep my footing, but the damage was done. Taking advantage of my momentary imbalance, a tentacle shot out of the darkness and wrapped itself firmly around my left arm.

"Lina!"

Gourry caught up to me, slashing down and severing the limb holding my arm. Almost immediately, it regenerated, but I was able to use that short window of time to wrestle my arm free.

"Lina, what are you doing?"

I couldn't reply. If I did, my incantation would lose its power. I kept the energies gathered inside of me, biding my time until the opportunity arose.

Slowly, more and more tentacles began to choose us as their target. With Gourry behind me and Milina providing magic support from afar, we were managing to keep them at bay, but unless something happened soon-

There!

Something slithered like greased lightning through the writhing mass of oncoming tentacles, darting at me! This was just what I'd been counting on. Thrusting my hands out, I finally let loose with the spell I'd been holding back .

"*Ragna Blade!*"

With a howl that seemed like space itself shrieking in agony, a dark sword formed of nothingness sprang to life in my hands, blocking the thing approaching my chest. It was the one tentacle tipped with the wickedly curved onyx claw.

But wait... My eyes widened in surprise. This was too much!

The edge of darkness called forth by Ragna Blade was enough to cut easily through mazoku - even those of considerable rank and power. But the hyper demon's black claw was holding it at bay. No... I took a closer look and realized that the Ragna Blade was eating away at the claw, but just as quickly, the thing was growing back.

I started getting nervous. It was impossible to boost the spell's power once I'd already cast it, and Ragna Blade consumed ludicrous amounts of magic to maintain as it was. If something didn't change soon, my blade of darkness would gutter out, and the razor-sharp claw would...

Just as I was imagining my unpleasant and grisly end, a crimson light shone from behind me.

"*Ruby Eye Blade!*" Luke cried, a scarlet aura forming around his sword. Rushing past me, he lifted it high and brought it down squarely on the black claw, at an angle to my own strike.

In the face of two attacks from different directions, the talon could only stand for the briefest of moments. With

an ugly dull sound that hurt my ears, it snapped into two pieces.

The demon let loose with an earsplitting cry that rang in the air like a solid thing.

Luke and Gourry gasped. "The demon's dying!"

So it was. The black mass that had effortlessly grown back from point-blank Dragon Slaves was slowly collapsing in on itself before our eyes. The tentacles extending from its body writhed frantically, then slumped lifelessly to the earth and faded into dry dust. Its many legs buckled under its own weight, and its body exploded in a cloud of dust as it hit the ground, all color bleeding away in an instant.

All that was left in the hyper demon's wake was a small mountain of dirt, and the confused murmurs of the townspeople.

Gourry walked up to stand beside me. "What happened, Lina?"

For once, he wasn't the only one in the dark. Luke and Milina were giving me quizzical stares as well. Hmm. Where to begin?

"Well, for starters, I'll start with the obvious facts. Like you all saw for yourselves, that thing used to be the man in black, Galva," I said after a moment of thought. "Not only was he cursed, he was also possessed by a mazoku.

That's why the resulting demon was so resistant to physical attacks and magic. There was only one way to bring it down... by destroying the mazoku that cast the curse. And where would that mazoku be? I thought that maybe the mazoku that had possessed Galva was the same one that had cursed him."

Luke butted in. "But how'd you arrive at that conclusion?"

I shot him a glare and said, "It was pretty obvious that the black sword transformed Galva into the thing we just fought. So I thought that perhaps the sword was both the mazoku that cursed Galva and the one that possessed him."

"The sword was a mazoku?" Luke muttered, frowning. I nodded.

"Pure mazoku are astral beings, anyway, so they can manifest on the physical plane in any form they want. Like for example, one of the mazoku that Gourry and I fought in the past took the form of two separate orbs, one red and one gray. It wouldn't be strange if a mazoku took the form of a sword in order to lure in greedy humans."

I didn't explain to Luke and Milina, but a large part of my hunch had also hinged on my observations of the Sword of Light Gourry had wielded in the past, which I suspected had been a high level mazoku from another plane of existence.

"So with that thought in mind, I took a good look at the monster and realized something: out of all those dozens and dozens of tentacles, only one of them had a claw. I thought, what if that's the mazoku's core?"

"So... Basically, your guess turned out to be right," Luke said slowly.

"Right. I was planning on beating a hasty retreat in case I turned out to be wrong, but thankfully things didn't turn out that way. Do you understand now, Gourry?"

"Nope."

Why, you...

"But it doesn't matter since we won, right?" he continued, oblivious. If he was going to say that, why ask me to explain in the first place? Bah, that moron.

I forced myself to calm down and turned to Luke. "But anyway," I said, "you aren't half bad, Luke. You harnessed Ruby Eye's power and made it into a red blade , didn't you? I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither have I," a calm voice commented from a few paces away.

We turned to see a hand plunge into the mound of dirt that had been the hyper demon's body. It sifted around for a moment and emerged, the hilt of the shattered black sword in its grasp.

"You!" Luke shouted.

"Ah, where are my manners? You've all done very well . I didn't really expect that this would be enough to get rid of you, Lina Inverse, but *you* proved to be quite the fighter as well, Mister Luke. I was a bit surprised."

Sherra smiled brightly, fiddling with the sword's hilt with one hand. Instead of the commoner's clothes she'd

been wearing before, Sherra was clad in what looked to be a set of priest's robes, modified for easy movement. They were colored pitch black, with silver decorations - I couldn't tell whether they were runes I didn't recognize, or simply decorations - sewn into the fabric.

"This is all your doing, isn't it?" I asked. "The sword, the demon attacks, everything."

"Of course," Sherra replied politely. "I spread the rumors about the sword, as well. Glenn truly was a fool, but he had his uses. I used his house as a base of operations after making him think I was his daughter, and made him spread rumors about the sword as well."

"I see... that's why you didn't need any means of support even though you were living by yourself. I guess you got impatient when nobody believed in Glenn's story and began creating demon 'invasions' here and there."

"Correct. I also spread rumors in the surrounding towns, though to be completely honest I never thought that Lina Inverse herself would get involved."

"Hey! D'you know who Sherra is?" Luke asked.

"Mmm... I can take an educated guess," I replied, but Sherra cut me off with a wave of her hand.

"That will be enough, Miss Lina," she said, giving me an annoying smirk. "I'm quite capable of introducing myself, thank you."

Sketching a mocking bow, she said, "As you might have already surmised, my name is Sherra. I come from the Kataart Mountains." Her smirk deepened. "And though I don't look like it, I am a genuine mazoku."

"*What?!*" Luke and Milina shouted together, evidently more than a little surprised.

"So? What were you after? From what you've explained so far, it seems that you were trying to separate us and lure us to where the sword was, one by one. Everything you did, from leaving alone at night, to deliberately getting yourself captured by the men in black, was designed to split us up, right? Though you failed handily in that respect."

"Shu, shut up!" Sherra growled, losing her calm. "I didn't expect you to reach the mountain so quickly!"

"And it doesn't seem like you were planning on making that demon," I pressed. "In fact, I think you transformed Galva into that demon and set him loose because you were miffed that your little trap didn't go according to plan."

"I said, *shut up!*"

Well, looked like I struck a nerve. Seemed she was either a bad planner, or easily flustered.

"Anyway, I don't know what you were trying to do, but now that your sword's been broken, I'd say your plans have been undone."

Contrary to my expectations, Sherra's smile suddenly returned.

"Oh, really? This sword is a mazoku I created, and it also serves as my weapon. So..."

She gave it a light shake, and suddenly the snapped blade grew back to its original length!

"What?"

"...I can easily do things like this," Sherra finished, holding the sword in a light ready stance. Her defense looked to be utterly impregnable.

But... if she could create a mazoku that, even considering the regenerative powers of Raugnut Rushavna, could withstand my Ragna Blade, and repair the shattered blade in an instant...

"Sherra, it seems you're not *just* a mazoku."

Sherra giggled. "You're right. I suppose my full title would make it easier for you to understand. I am Sherra, General of Dynast."

I found myself at a loss for words. She was *Dynast Grausherra's general?*

"What's that?" Luke asked, confused.

"The direct subordinate of Dynast Grausherra, one of Ruby Eye Shabranigdu's five retainers," I managed to say . In the past, I'd met the Greater Beast's priest, and personally fought with the Chaos Dragon's priest and general. Long story short, each and every one of them had been incredibly strong.

If Sherra was truly Dynast's general, that meant she was on par with those beings, and even outnumbered four to one, it was safe to say she could easily mop the floor with all of us.

Our only chance was to make her retreat!

"The *nerve* of you!" I shouted, injecting righteous indignation into my voice as I pointed at Sherra.

"Hmm? What is it? Are you angry that I deceived you? That I destroyed this small village? Surely it isn't because I turned that man into a demon." Sherra spoke with the smooth confidence of a person sure of her superiority, but I ignored her sureness and plowed onward.

"No, what irritates me is that your name is *Sherra,* servant of Dynast Grau*sherra!* What kind of a name is that?"

Sherra's calm façade cracked a little around the edges. "What?! What are you talking about? My name was given to me by Lord Dynast himself! I'm sure there's a deep and meaningful reason as to why he chose it!"

Ha *ha!* Pay dirt! All right, now to move in for the kill.

"Sherra, surely your counterpart priest isn't named something tacky like Grau or Grou, right?"

Sherra froze completely, her eyes widening with shock . There *was* someone with that name? What was with Dynast?

"A, a human like you couldn't hope to understand the workings of Lord Dynast's mind!" Sherra stammered, losing her composure completely. "There *has* to be-"

"Has to be what? How about you ask him yourself? Who knows, it might turn out that he didn't really have anything in mind at all when he thought up your name, eh?"

"Of course not! My name is sure to have a complex meaning!"

"Prove it!"

Sherra opened her mouth to reply, stood gaping for a moment, closed it again. Grinding her teeth, she lifted her sword to point at me.

"*Fine!* Just you wait! I'll retreat for now, but next time we meet I'll be sure to have asked about the meaning of my name!"

With that completely unimpressive parting shot, Sherra turned and faded abruptly into the shadows. Phew.

"Heheh... I guess mazoku are weak to mental insecurity, being purely astral beings and all," I muttered.

Luke peered at me doubtfully. "Are... all mazoku like that?"

Epilogue

"You guys take care."

The next day, we said our goodbyes to Luke and Milina.

"Looks like we went through one hell of a lot of trouble for nothing," Luke commented, smiling bitterly. " And hey, just so you know. If we ever find ourselves on opposite sides looking for some treasure, don't expect us to go easy on you."

"I should say the same to you."

"Heh. Anyway, you guys watch out for yourselves, too ."

"Take extra care that Milina doesn't dump you."

"Gah! Shut up!" Luke spat, turning away from us with a furious blush on his cheeks. "Come on, Milina! We're leaving!"

"Until next time," Milina said to us, giving us a light smile. She turned and followed Luke down the road.

When the two were just small dots on the horizon, Gourry suddenly piped up. "Well, that's settled."

I sighed. "What's settled, Gourry?"

"Huh?" Gourry looked up at the sky for a moment. " Uhh... Come to think of it, nothing, really."

"Right. We did manage to defeat the huge monster and get Sherra to retreat, but on the other hand we still don't know who the men in black were working for. Zain ran away, and we didn't manage to get a decent sword for you, either. What bothers me most is that we still don't know what Sherra was after. Regardless of her temper or intelligence, she's Dynast's general, and she's on the move. I think it might have something to do with Hellmaster's death, which must've really crippled the mazoku."

"I see."

I'd bet money, and lots of it, that Gourry *didn't* see, but I let it go.

Something big was coming. I wouldn't be able to give a definite reply as to just what it was - I didn't have enough clues - but something was coming.

All I could say for sure was that the mazoku, having lost Hellmaster, were sure to be planning some sort of counterattack to make up for it. In other words...

I stared up at the clear blue sky, the sun shining down brightly.

In other words, war might be on the horizon. A war between mazoku and humankind.

The Cursed Sword of Bezeld
Fin

Afterword

K: Whew! I've really, really, *really* kept you waiting! It's finally here! I present you with the ninth installment of the Slayers, "The Cursed Sword of Bezeld."

L: Heheheheh...

K: (shuffles back uneasily) Wh-why are you laughing like that?

L: It's nothing. I was just thinking that the TV anime debuted without a hitch.*

K: Oh, right. That was really something to celebrate!

L: Mmm... Did you see episode four?

K: Of course I did, but why... ah...!

L: Eheheh... Subordinate S!

S: Yes, ma'am. Here I am. But... ma'am, you're staring at me in a most unsettling way.

L: Ahahaha... you saw episode four too, didn't you?

S: Erk!

L: Mmmm.

S: Please, no! Wait! That shovel looks too sharp-

Smack!

L: Ah, I feel so much better now. Shall we get on with the afterword?

K: I can't help but feel a bit sorry for Subordinate S.

L: Anyway, the anime's begun, and there's even a movie scheduled to come out in the summer! This is all thanks to me.

K: Well, you're right, but you don't actually appear in the movie.

L: Huh?!

K: In other words, people who've only watched the TV anime or the movies will think, "Who's L? There was a character named L in Slayers?"

L: No! And I was hoping to place a bit higher in the third Slayers popularity poll!

K: You still haven't given up on that? I told you, I'm not going to have another popularity poll. It's too much trouble for the people in the editorial office.

L: Since when did *you* ever care about other people? All you have to do is make the poll simpler. Like, only allow people to send official post cards, one vote per letter, but allow people to vote more than once. Then we can stack up the votes per character, and rank them according to who has the highest stack!

K: That's such an irrational method, you know. And the diehard Zelgadis fans in particular might even go bankrupt buying post cards.

L: Mmm, come to think of it, Zelgadis *does* seem to have a lot of enthusiastic fans. There was that fierce debate about Zelgadis and Amelia's love in Dragon Magazine a while ago, too.

K: Right! I took a look at one of the post cards the fans sent, and the opinion of those against the couple on Zelgadis's side was roughly, "If Amelia lays her hands on him, we'll kill her."

L: Wow, really? And what about the ones on Amelia's side?

K: They said, "You can try, but your attacks will have no effect." And don't even get me started on the people who were *for* the couple. A lot of them were just curious as to what the baby would look like!

L: What's with those Slayers fans?

K: I don't know, either. It just happened that since Gourry and Lina get put together as a couple by the fans, the ones left over, Amelia and Zelgadis, get matched up with each other as well. I never thought things would get so serious. But anyway, I really don't want to have another popularity poll.

L: Surely you don't think such a gross transgression will go unpunished?

K: Of course I think so.

L: Oh ho. So that's how you're going to be, is it? Come here, Subordinate S!

(L snaps her fingers, but nobody comes.)

L: ...Huh?

K: You hit him with your shovel just a moment ago, remember?

L: Oh, right! So I did! I completely forgot!

K: He's really got it tough, doesn't he.

L: I'm sure that if the fans ask enough, or you run out of things to say in your afterwords, you'll start up a poll again.

K: Err... I can't say that that's not a possibility...

L: And *then!* It will be time for my countless fans spread across the country to vote for me! I'll be waiting!

K: What? You have *fans?*

L: Grrr...

K: Wait! Wait, not the hammer...!

SLAM

L: And so the author's shut up as well. Now, then! Gentle readers, thank you for reading. Until we meet again, goodbye!

(*: This novel was published in Japan in 1995, around the same time as the first season of the Slayers anime.)